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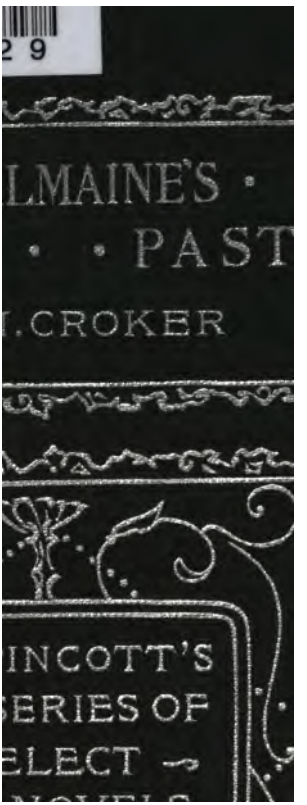
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- Fiction, English

MISS BALMAINE'S PAST

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MISS BALMAINE'S PAST

I.

BY
B. M. CROKER

AUTHOR OF

"MR. JERVIS," "A THIRD PERSON," "A FAMILY LIKENESS," ETC.

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MISS BALMAINE'S PAST.

CHAPTER I.

DOWN in a desolate part of the south of England, bordering on the celebrated "Romney Marsh," and between that and the sea, there is what *we* should call a village, but its inhabitants dignify by the name of a "town," and boast that they have a charter dating from the time of Edward the Confessor; that the famous Earl Godwin was once lord of the manor; and proudly declare themselves to be dwellers in one of the most ancient townships between the four seas.

Be that as it may, two long straggling streets, a few outlying red houses, with steep roofs, and the Norman church, are all that remain of its former importance. The houses are old—very old—remarkable curiosities in their way, with odd little windows, and queer doors in unexpected situations; the village is unchanged in outward appearance since George the First was king, and the people themselves are staid and old-fashioned—the descendants, in many cases (low be it spoken), of smugglers.

The hamlet of Horton stands in a kind of oasis between Romney Marsh—which cuts it off from civilization, as it were, for miles on one side—and thousands

of acres of waste land, stolen from the sea, on the other. Horton is out of the world—a locality in some respects as lonely as if it were in the backwoods of America. Even in the old days, it was beyond the track of stage-coaches. No spanking, smoking teams ever rattled up to the Merry Sailor inn. It was too far from the shingly shore, and too exposed for a fishing station, and too isolated by marsh lands, to have any railway in its neighbourhood.

How or why people live there it is difficult to understand, unless it is from pure force of habit, and being mostly in thriving circumstances—owning their own solid houses, and cultivating their own bleak bit of land, which has descended to them from their ill-doing, but well-to-do forefathers.

One or two families of the upper ten still cling to this out-of-the-world spot. There is Horton Manor: just at the end of the village, with six great elm trees on guard beside its gates; the ivy-covered walls enclosing it run alongside of a shady lane (for there are plenty of hardy evergreen oaks all round Horton), and inside these walls there is a quaint old red-brick house, standing on a gravel sweep, with regular rows of small windows, peaked gables, and a high-tiled roof. At the back, it opens upon a large enclosure, half garden, half pleasure-ground, with splendid trees dotted here and there, long straight walks, a noted mulberry tree, and a thatched summer-house.

There were strange stories current about the Manor in former times; people said that the amount of cellarage was out of *all* proportion to the size of the house, and that the Balmaines, from father to son, had been the hereditary chiefs of the smugglers in Horton. The

present inhabitant of the Manor was a frail old lady (reputed to be a miser), who never stirred across the threshold from one year's end to another. She lived almost entirely in two rooms on the second floor, and dressed in the fashion of a dead-and-gone generation, wearing a short-waisted black gown, a white net handkerchief fastened at her throat by a little garnet brooch, and disposed in folds across her chest, and a monstrous black cap. She stooped a good deal now, and walked with a gold-headed stick, and was not *quite* as clear in her memory, or her sight, as she had been ten years previously. This was old Mrs. Balmaine of Horton, the owner of the Manor, and of a great deal besides, in the shape of land, tenements, shares, scrip, old lace, old china, old jewels, and a most ungovernable temper. She was the possessor of something else as well, something that she prized in a drowsy, undemonstrative fashion: a grand-daughter, her dead son's only child, Rosamond Balmaine; and Rosamond did not belie her name, for she was as beautiful in her own style as the fairest and sweetest flower that ever bloomed alone and unnoticed among a wilderness of brambles. The old madam had been a Balmaine by birth, and, retaining her maiden name, had married a good-looking young squire, whom, as long as he lived, she had adored, and ruled with a rod of iron. But one grey winter afternoon, her husband was brought home to her dead; he had broken his neck out hunting, and she was left a widow—a handsome, rich, well-born widow—with one son, a little boy of four years old. Mrs. Kitty Balmaine never took another spouse.

Why it was that she resisted every offer, whether she was too much attached to the memory of her late

husband, or whether men were too much afraid of her well-known "Balmaine temper," ever remained an unsolved problem. She resided at Balmaine Court (a place about sixty miles from Horton), duly put her heir into jackets, whipped him soundly and frequently, and finally sent him to school. Undismayed by her husband's fate, she hunted for years, with a courage and persistence that called forth immense admiration from the male sex, who were often compelled to follow the bold widow's lead; but their stay-at-home wives and daughters cast up their hands and eyes when they heard of Madam Balmaine's feats in a scarlet riding-habit, on a thoroughbred piebald hunter. But Madam Balmaine did not care a straw for the squiresses, nor for what they said of her behind her back; in her presence it would be a truly bold woman who dared to look askance at Kitty Balmaine. In due time her son Tom grew up, went into the army (in spite of his mother), spent his money like a man, and married—married a nobody without a penny, with nothing to recommend her but a small waist and a pretty face—a mere attorney's daughter, who had danced and flirted herself into the good graces of Lieutenant Balmaine.

His mother was beside herself; she had never heard of the match until it was all arranged. And she had had a fair-haired, well-born bride, with a somewhat large nose, put aside in her *own* mind for Tom—and he had anticipated her, and pleased himself!

Madam Balmaine was fond of her son, and between grief and rage, she was nearly crazy; her domestics had anything but a happy time for some weeks subsequent to the wedding. Tom—who was an intrepid young man—boldly brought his bride to the Court, and his mother

for the occasion put a strong restraint upon herself. There were no triumphal arches, no feastings, no bonfires; but she sent her own carriage-and-four to meet the happy pair, and received her new daughter on the hall-door steps and kissed her. But the bride (whose head was completely turned by her success in marrying the owner of this splendid mansion, and widespreading, well-timbered park) accorded the old lady a frosted salute, with an air of great condescension, and then haughtily requested "to be shown to her room."

She was not aware that Madam Balmaine was monarch of all she surveyed, and that Tom had not an acre or a penny of his own, or she would not have patronized her mother-in-law, and asked for this, and ordered that, and conducted herself as if *she* was the mistress, and the other a mere deposed and powerless potentate. The old lady had a serious, not to say stormy, interview with her son a week later, and ordered him to explain matters fully to Theresa. He might remain at the Court, but she would depart at once, and remove bag and baggage to Horton Manor, where she had been born.

This intelligence the bride hailed with delight, and actually danced and skipped about the room in a childish and ridiculous manner. The old woman had "cleared out." She was mistress of the position; the victory was *hers*, and, she audaciously added, "that she had made herself obnoxious purposely, with this delightful end in view." But she did not clap her hands and dance when she saw all the old pictures and plate removed, the family lace and diamonds packed up, and the carriages and horses, and the fine staff of liveried servants, dispersed as by an enchanter's wand.

"Balmaine Court and five hundred a year!" she

screamed. "Was that the allowance the old witch offered them? Why, it was beggary. Tom must remain in the Service, and the Court must be let." For they were both young people who had extravagant tastes.

A lady's maid and valet, a carriage and pair, dinners and opera-boxes, jewels and dress, soon swallowed up their cash, and they found themselves heavily in debt. There was nothing for it but to go to India; and young Mrs. Balmaine was the more determined upon this step, knowing that it would be highly distasteful to her mother-in-law, whose objections and protestations were made to deaf ears, but her large bribe was secretly pocketed by Mrs. Tom, who with her husband sailed for the East in a P. and O. steamer, after a brief and merry career in England.

A year later, Tom died of fever in Barrackpore, and his widow despatched her only child (a little girl of six months old) to the care of her grandmother, in charge of an ayah, and accompanied by a black-edged letter, with a border so deep that there was barely space for an address upon the envelope.

"The sweet child was far *too* precious to be kept in that dreadful country, which had deprived her of her darling Tom. She herself was in such poor health that the doctors had forbidden her to venture the voyage, and therefore she was going to the hills with some kind and sympathetic friends, and would return to England before the next hot weather." But Mrs. Thomas Balmaine never returned. She liked India; she had far more congenial society out there than would be likely to fall to her lot at home, cooped up with a malignant old woman, who would expect her to sit in sackcloth and ashes, and to mourn as a widow all the days of her life.

She married—married after less than twelve months—a handsome young officer of Engineers, who died—in fact, he committed suicide—within five years, leaving her a widow for the second time. Still she did not return home. Still she clung to the Indian hills, announcing her punctual departure each hot weather, and invariably finding some plausible reason for remaining where she was. Finally, she had taken for her third husband an elderly and somewhat impecunious colonel, who was at last enjoying an excellent staff appointment at Simla; and the prospect of Rosamond meeting her mother, Mrs. Brice, was now, if anything, more remote than ever.

Rosamond had spent all her childhood at Horton; then she had been sent to a select establishment at Brighton—kept by a lady who "offered every advantage, religious and educational," for the sum of two hundred guineas per annum. As she was now seventeen, she was not to return to school after the holidays, and it became a much-debated question between the old lady and Maggs, her confidential maid, "What was to be done with her?" She ought to go into society and be seen, and make a good match; but who was to take her? They had no acquaintances, and no friends beyond Dr. Black and his wife, and the old rector, Mr. Cameron.

"However, Rosamond is young, and she has plenty of time yet," was her grandmother's way of winding-up the subject, as Maggs put her to bed, left a bowl of posset beside her, the lozenges within easy reach, settled the night light in the most approved manner, and put up the fire-guard.

Madam Balmaine did not take her meals downstairs.

Rosamond invariably breakfasted alone; afterwards she paid a visit to her grandmother, read her the morning psalm and the daily paper, was lectured a little about holding herself badly, poking her chin, or crossing her feet, and was free for the day—the great, long, empty day!

After she had wandered round the garden, snipped off some flowers, practised for an hour, what was there to do with the huge gaping hours of a summer's afternoon?—especially in a place like Horton, where there were no neighbours, no shopping, no tennis, no lending library—not even a clothing club! It was worse than a convent, for *there* was companionship and ample occupation! Here was a pretty, a startlingly pretty girl, her own mistress, so to speak, with absolutely no employment! What an opportunity for him who finds some mischief still for idle hands to do! So old Madam Balmaine dozed and woke up again, and dozed once more in an armchair at her open window, or read venerable novels—her own contemporaries—and talked a little to herself, and munched liquorice ball, whilst her sole heiress, her beautiful grand-daughter, the Rose of Horton, ran with hasty, elastic steps over the green turf across "the Marshes."

To meet, of course, a young man.

CHAPTER II.

AND how came Rosamond Balmaine to *know* a young man, much less to be running to meet him, this lovely July afternoon, just as the shadows of the trees were beginning to stretch themselves upon the short turf?

Ah! thereby hangs a tale.

About six weeks previously, Rosamond and her little puppy Dash had rambled a long way from home. The young lady was an excellent walker, and knew every inch of "the Marshes," as they were called, and with good reason. Had she not been brought up on them ever since she could toddle? This particular evening she rambled aimlessly along inland, and from the scrubby, somewhat bleak pasture, she approached alders fringing grassy roads, and a part of the world intersected in all directions by sluggish dykes. Not a soul had she seen. There was a dead, an almost oppressive, silence around her, and the rapid noiseless flight of roostward winging birds caused her to recollect, with a start, that it was time she, too, was going homewards; but she had no desire to retrace her steps in the same track. She cut across the next flat, and over a stile into what she believed to be the little-used high-road that led back to Horton.

No, Miss Balmaine was in no hurry to return; she had experienced what it was to sit indoors these lovely

summer evenings bolt upright in grandmamma's dressing-room, relating all she had seen—not much, beyond the cows and crows—knitting a good piece of the old lady's stocking, taking up dropped stitches, and reading aloud Rasselas, or the "Old English Baron," which she almost knew by heart, and finally, brewing her grandmother her nightly jorum of port-wine negus, with more wine than hot water, and plenty of sugar and nutmeg. Ugh! how she hated the smell of it! And why would grandmamma always keep her windows hermetically sealed?

Thinking of these things, the young lady loitered along, and coming to a stile in the hedge, turning into a lane, rested her elbows on the top bar, and her chin on her hands, and gave herself up to maiden meditation entirely—fancy free.

It was no wonder she was called the "Wild Rose of Horton," said the few strangers who had seen her. In figure she was tall and very slight—too slight, but then she was only seventeen. Her hair was brown and abundant, and gathered up at the nape of her neck in one thick coil; her face was oval, her complexion like the wild roses in the hedges around her, and her dark eyes looked out between the longest, blackest lashes that ever swept a pretty cheek.

She wore a white dress, with a massive silver belt, a silver necklet and bangles, all Indian work—gifts from her far-away stranger mother; a crimson rose was stuck in her breast, her straw hat hung over her arm, and her dog lay at her feet. A man must have been hard to please, if he declared that he had ever seen a prettier picture than that presented by Rosamond and Dash as they rested by the stile and watched the red sun sink lower and lower beneath the flat horizon.

"We must be going home, Dash," she said, rousing herself at last. "It is getting near supper-time, and we have three good miles before us"—springing lightly over the stile, and landing in the lane as agile as a deer; but as she did so she uttered a smothered exclamation of astonishment and dismay, for standing beside her (having just slipped out from the shelter of the hedge) was a burly, ferocious-looking tramp.

"Jail Bird" was written all over him in legible characters; his hair was closely shorn to his evil-looking, sloping skull (he was probably out two days), little sharp ferret eyes gleamed from under a regular pent-house of a forehead—little eyes that looked at Miss Balmaine's silver ornaments with the critical glance of a *connoisseur*. He wore shabby fustian clothes, of the "dog-fancier cut," a fur cap, and a dirty red woollen comforter, and he was certainly *not* the sort of person in whom you felt an invincible reliance at first sight, nor yet exactly the character you would care to meet—were you a solitary young lady—in a lonely lane, about three miles from home, at eight o'clock in the evening.

Rosamond choked down her feelings, and taking her hat from her arm, was about to resume it, and pass on with all the *sangfroid* that she could muster.

"I beg your pardon, miss," said the tramp, in an oily voice, "but might I ask what o'clock it is? That dog o' yourn don't bite, do he?"

"I cannot tell you the hour; I have not my watch—about eight o'clock," she returned nervously. "No, he never bit any one in his life. Come away, Dash."

"I beg pardon, miss, for making so bold, but maybe *you* are going to Horton, and could point me out the way, or let me walk alongside of you"—with a leer. "In

these lonely roads I am a bit *nervous*, and would be glad of your company."

"The road to Horton lies straight before you. Please to pass me. I hate any one walking beside me."

"Do you, now"—glancing about cautiously—"*except* your young man! Well, I'm not one o' your nasty particulars. I like walking alongside o' a pretty girl as well as any one. I suppose, now, yer wouldn't give me a kiss, would yer?"—and he rubbed his unshorn chin, and grinned hideously.

To this Rosamond made no reply, but her heart began to beat very fast, and she became red and white by turns.

"If yer *don't*, you know, I'll be obliged to take those pretty little silver things from you—and that would be a pity, now, wouldn't it?"

"Wretch, robber!" said Rosamond, pausing and confronting him, "you would not dare!"—regarding him with pallid cheeks and blazing eyes.

"Dare indeed!"—with a hoarse, mocking laugh, seizing one of her hands.

At this his victim gave a shrill scream, and he added ferociously—

"Scream away! You may scream yourself hoarse, and none will hear you. No one comes this 'ere road—for I know it well—more often than once a week. If you give any bother I'll cut your caterwauling throat! Hand over that belt o' yourn—do you hear?—or I shall take it. Come!"

Rosamond, with wild and agonized looks, glanced up and down the lane—no help of any sort, no one in sight, no one coming—and with trembling fingers unclasped the heavy Indian circlet, and handed it over.

"Golly, it's a tidy weight!" he said, weighing it approvingly.

"Now, my sweet young woman, I'll trouble you for the necklet."

Her necklet was very, very slowly detached: anything to gain time.

"Yes, my dear, it's a very nice necklet, and I see that the bracelets match it. We won't part them."

Having secured the bangles, he surveyed his trembling victim critically, and said—

"Hold up your hands. No rings! That's bad. No watch—worse still. However, I am a very easy-going fellow; a little contents me, and I don't mind letting you run off home to your supper, if you give me a real good hearty kiss."

"Never!" she cried passionately. "You may kill me first!"—springing past him with such speed, and so unexpectedly, that she had run about ten yards before the ruffian realized that she was gone.

But he was not called "Supple Jack" for nothing; and in a second he was after her. Fast as she ran—fear adding wings to her feet—he ran faster, howling out oaths and threats of a description calculated to turn the blood of an ordinary young woman into ice in her veins; stupid, foolish Dash, galloping by his agonized mistress with cheery barks, and evidently thinking the whole affair capital fun, and just what he was longing for—a race.

The tramp was gaining at every step, and Rosamond was convinced that he would murder her *now*. Her hair was undone, her breath failing, her eyes nearly glazed with terror; still she ran on and on, and at the corner of the lane came into violent collision

with another man—a gentleman this time. She was saved!

This gentleman, who happened so fortunately to be on the spot, was a Mr. Ronald Gordon, a civil engineer, who had been sent down to prospect and report on a part of the Marsh, on behalf of a railway company. He had his head-quarters at a little hamlet within a mile of this particular locality, and had been hard at work for the last week. As to his antecedents, Ronald Gordon was one of the younger branches of a very old and well-connected Scotch family, and an only child. His father had been wealthy; and in his younger days Ronald had seldom a wish ungratified. He had possessed a pony, a watch, and a gun at an age when other boys merely dream in a hazy way of such splendid possibilities. He had received a first-class education—no expense spared—and had been that *rara avis*, a rich boy, with fine prospects, who had brains, and had used them; and it was well that he had done so, for in a disastrous bank failure his father lost every penny, and had, in his old age, to begin the world afresh.

Ronald now found his talents of some use. He became a civil engineer, and was beginning to make his way slowly, but surely. He and his father lived together—his mother had been dead for years—and "scraped along," as he called it, comfortably enough. Of course, there was no Lafitte Claret (1864), no brougham, no Havanna cigars, for the old gentleman, but there was a good plain dinner, a comfortable arm-chair, and a meerschaum pipe, and he still (by his son's commands) kept up his subscription to the old "Survivors" club—there he saw the papers and played a rubber of whist—and on the whole he felt that, with

such a good son, and his commercial reputation perfectly spotless, life was worth living, after all.

His son was known to be a rising man, and *he* had ruined himself to pay his bank creditors. (There were no solid sums put slyly away in other people's names; every spoon, table-cloth, and chair was sacrificed to a high sense of honour.) Therefore, not more than three-quarters of his old friends dropped him gently and gradually, and forgot the days when they had sat at his table, and shot over his moors.

Ronald Gordon was seven-and-twenty, tall, dark, and good-looking, without being strikingly handsome. He had more the air of a smart cavalry officer than a plodding, hard-working civil engineer; and, indeed, just before the family crash he had been gazetted to a crack regiment. He did not go in for ladies' society. He had no leisure for "butterflying," as he called it, in London drawing-rooms; his time meant money, and he could not afford to squander it. Of course, he had his *own* ideas about things, and what the one perfect and ideal woman would be like; but he never dreamt that he would come across her in such a forsaken, forgotten corner of the world as Horton Marshes!

He had been measuring distances all day and walking miles. His last feat had been to climb a crumbling old tower (which had neither name, fame, or history), and view the landscape o'er for the last time. It had a broken stone stair, leading to an upper floor, where a yawning aperture at either side gave four different views of the country. When he looked out of one he beheld Horton Marsh and the sea; out of another Horton village and the tall church spire; out of another —what? A girl in white, in a lane close by, a man

threatening her, and a barking useless fool of a dog! The man was a tramp; the girl—— There was no time to speculate.

In another moment he was headlong down the stairs and across the field, and into a road which debouched upon the scene in question. Here she came, running like the wind, and the ruffian after her.

"Save me! save me!" she panted breathlessly; and in a second he had interposed between her and her pursuer, who, unable to stop his headlong career, was brought up by a strong hand—a hand stronger than his own, and that was saying a good deal—on the collar of his coat.

"What the devil are you doing to this young lady?" —shaking him like a rat as he spoke.

"Has he robbed you?"—turning to Rosamond, who stood by gasping for breath, and trembling all over, like an aspen leaf.

"Yes, he has taken my belt and necklet and bangles."

"You are a nice jail bird, you are! Hand them over this instant!"—giving him another angry shake. "I think a much *longer* visit to a place you know pretty well would do you no harm."

"Young women has no business" (disgorging spoil as he spoke) "to be going about with valuables in this way, a-tempting o' poor men!" growled the tramp.

"I wonder you didn't say *honest*, you scoundrel! Are they all right?"—handing them over to Rosamond. In so doing he somewhat relaxed his hold, and the thief, taking swift advantage of this, gave himself a sudden wrench, and was off into a neighbouring plantation like an arrow from a bow. Mr. Gordon was about to follow, but a glance at the young lady deterred him.

"Don't, *don't* leave me alone!" she gasped hysterically; "there may be *more*, and I shall be murdered!"

"Oh, I don't think there is any chance of that; the fellow has no companions in these parts. But, of course, I will stay, if you will allow me to see you home"—picking up her hat, and looking at her critically for the first time.

Although her face was pallid, her lips quivering, and her hair tumbling over her shoulders, he thought she had the most beautiful face he had ever seen.

Who would expect to meet a high-born-looking maiden, with a purely classic profile, wandering alone on the Marshes of Horton? Where did she live? Had she dropped from the clouds?

"I don't know how I can thank you," she began tremulously, and now when all was over, to her companion's great horror, commencing to cry. "He—that man—was going to kill me—he said so: only for you, he would have murdered me."

"He was probably trying to give you a good fright; after being so plucky all along, surely you are not going to break down now? Come, here is your hat; had you not better put it on?"

Rosamond made a great effort, for she was on the verge of hysterics, swallowed down her sobs, twisted up her hair with hasty, trembling fingers, and declared that "she was ready to go home, but was ashamed to take him so far—all the way to Horton."

"Horton, where the old church is. I did not know that any" ("gentry" he was going to say, but corrected it) "people lived there; nothing but a few fossilized smugglers."

"I am not a fossilized smuggler," returned Rosamond, with a somewhat wintry smile, "and I live there."

"And may I ask how you came to be wandering all alone so far from home? The lady who went through Ireland with her jewels intact would have fared badly down in *this* part of the world. You know the song, 'Rich and Rare'?"

"Yes, of course I do. The reason I ramble is because I like it, and I ramble alone because I have no companion; but after to-day I never can venture out again —and it was my only pleasure."

Mr. Ronald Gordon glanced curiously at the young lady, whose only pleasure consisted in rambling about these bleak regions by herself. Was she quite sane?

Yes, and unmistakably in earnest, he told himself, after a long look of grave interrogation.

"You seem surprised," she said, responding to his gaze with a pair of innocent frank eyes.

"I am surprised. Have you no relations or friends, no one in the world belonging to you, that they permit a—a——" (he was going to say beautiful girl, but didn't) "young lady to wander about unprotected and alone?"

"Unprotected!"—with a laugh. "I never dreamt of protection till now. I have only one relation—grandmamma—and she never goes out, and never leaves her room. We live at Horton Manor. My name is Rosamond Balmaine."

"Rosamond Balmaine," he repeated slowly; "and mine is Ronald Gordon. I am a civil engineer. I have come down to survey the Marsh for the new railway."

"The new railway"—eagerly. "Oh, I do hope you will make it *soon*."

"I am not surprised at your most natural wish; you

are a little bit out of the world. Have you lived all your life at Horton?"

"No; I was born in India. My mother lives there still. She is married again. Only fancy, I have never seen her since I was six months old!"

Mr. Gordon instantly branded this lady in his mind as an inhuman, unnatural parent, and went on to ask: "And have you no companion but your grandmother?"

"No one but the old servants, and Mrs. Black, the doctor's wife; but *she* is old too."

"Good heavens!" ejaculated her companion. "And do you *never* see a person of your own age? How on earth do you spend your time? I wonder you don't grow into a cabbage——"

"A cabbage rose," she suggested merrily. "My name is Rose. I have not quite come to that stage *yet*. I read to grandmamma, I garden, and"—triumphantly—"I go to church twice on Sundays."

Mr. Gordon proceeded on in silence for some moments. He was trying to realize such a life, and failing in the attempt. What a shame to keep this pretty, graceful girl, now walking beside him, buried in this social graveyard! She, who was fitted to shine anywhere, seemed born to blush unseen. Perhaps it was the happiest lot, after all! Here she lived a calm, peaceful existence; out in the great world it would be different, for she possessed in the highest degree the fatal—yes, he repeated to himself—the fatal gift of beauty. At last they reached the old postern door, in the wall opposite the church, and he was about to take off his hat and to take leave, when his companion said, "I cannot ask you in, or I would. Grandmamma never sees any one but Dr. Black. I wish I could tell you how grateful

I am, but I am not good at making speeches." Holding out her hand, and glancing timidly up into her companion's dark face, she added, "I shall never forget you, Mr. Gordon."

"Nor I you, Miss Balmaine," he returned, with a quick smile. "Instead of thanks, which I don't want, will you give me something else?" And with an eagerness that amazed himself, he said, "That rose in your dress."

And she did, rivalling it in colour, as she laid it in his hand.

"What possessed him to ask for it?" he angrily demanded of himself, as he walked home through the rapidly falling twilight; and a casual observer might have inquired *why* he treasured it so carefully, as he leaped wide wet dykes and vaulted gates. Why did he put it in water when he reached the humble inn at which he lodged?

Ay, why?

"Now, where the dickens did he get *this?*" said an inquisitive chamber-maid, fingering it profanely, when he had gone out surveying the next morning. "Whatever has he been up to? and where has he been? Roses like this 'ere"—sniffing it critically—"don't grow on such places as Horton Marshes, and can't be picked up there. *We* know better. He is a-courting some young lady, as sure as my name is Emma Trowbridge."

CHAPTER III.

FOR once in her life Rosamond could heartily and satisfactorily respond to her grandmother's invariable formula, "Any news?"—a question asked regularly every evening, in spite of the unchanging reply, "No, not a word, grandmother." What did the old lady expect the girl would have to tell?

Probably she had not seen a human being the whole afternoon—nothing but the crows, and cattle on the Marshes.

But to-night Rosamond had a great deal to tell. The history of her walk, of her encounter with the tramp, of her rescue by the stranger, was all unfolded to the old lady's ears. She listened with many loud ejaculations, and many rappings of her stick, and then insisted on hearing the whole story *all over again.*

"It's as good as a book, or a newspaper; it's the best thing I have heard for many a long day," she exclaimed excitedly. Then she rang for Maggs, and the tale was once more related for her benefit; but Maggs looked grave—very grave; she was not childish in her mind—and she was horrified at hearing of the ruffianly behaviour of the tramp, and not too well pleased to listen to Rosamond's warm praises of the young gentleman, who had arrived so opportunely.

"This rambling about by yourself, Miss Rosamond,

will never do. You are getting too big to be flying round the country, like a tomboy; and it can't be done no longer, and that's flat."

"Then you will have to come with me yourself, armed with a big stick," rejoined Miss Balmaine, laughing, "for I can't stay in the house always."

"Well, we will see about that. You can't be going about alone, and that's settled. Now, madam"—to the old lady, coaxingly—"don't you think you had better be going to bed? Here is the hot water for your negus."

But Madam Balmaine was far too much taken up with the adventures of her granddaughter, to listen to reason. She drank off her negus, demanded a second brew, and positively sat up a whole hour past her bed-time, talking, questioning, ejaculating, and saying, "Well, to be sure; well, to be sure! Maggs, did you ever hear of anything so extraordinary?"

And Maggs replied, at least twenty times, that she had *not.*

At last the old lady was persuaded to retire, and her example was followed by her granddaughter, who, worn out with an unusually long walk, and all the exciting events of the evening, slept soundly.

Next morning she awoke, as usual, very early, and watched the daylight stealing into the room, and heard the birds singing lustily in the trees below her window, and tried, as she opened her sleepy eyes, to remember all at once what very strange events had happened yesterday. In a moment it all came back—the awful scene in the lane, the ruffian's threats, his grimy hand on her wrist, his breath on her cheek. She lay and thought the whole scene over at her leisure. It seemed like a dream, a hideous nightmare; and the tall young

man in the tweed suit, *he* was no dream, he was a reality. What nice dark eyes he had! She was not a bit afraid of him. The way in which he spoke had put her entirely at her ease, and she almost felt as if she had known him before; and *this* was really remarkable, for he was actually the first, the only young man, she had ever opened her lips to in her life! And will it be thought strange that, as she dressed, and ate her breakfast, and strolled round the garden, she thought a great deal more of Mr. Gordon than of Supple Jack?

"She would never see him again, of course," she remarked to herself, as she picked the twin sister of the rose she had given him the previous evening, and placed it in her gown.

She wondered why he had asked for the flower, and what he was going to do with it. And she also wondered rather frequently—and with somewhat heightened colour—if she had been very bold and unmaidenly, to tell him that she would never forget him! She was sure she had disgraced herself. Why, oh, *why* had she said it? What had possessed her? She hoped, now that she came to reflect over the whole thing, that she might never see him again. What an odious, gushing, country bumpkin he must think her! And she sat down in the little summer house, with her elbows on the rustic table, and winked away several scalding tears —tears of shame that had risen to her eyes. What would Mrs. Black have said, if she had heard her volunteering to tell a young man "she would never forget him"? Oh, she could never look him in the face! Nevertheless she was fated to see him again, and soon—as soon as the following Sunday.

The congregation of Horton peeped over their

high-backed pews in gaping amazement as they beheld a tall, strange gentleman walking up the matting of the centre aisle. He held himself well; he had such a distinguished air, and the dark, commanding eyes of the old Gordons, that the much-impressed pew-opener (a little lame woman, in a large black bonnet) took him for a lord at the very least, and ushered him promptly into the only grand pew in the church—that of the Balmaine family—an immense square place, as large as a room, carpeted, and having a table in the middle, covered with a moth-eaten red cloth, and piles of musty old Prayer-books, as ancient as the time of Queen Anne. Above it, on the walls, hung two huge hatchments, and around it, in the aisle, were brasses and monuments to many dead-and-gone Balmaines. And their last living representative was sitting alone, in the seat of honour, a great carved armchair, amongst the dusty, tarnished, and chipped tombs of her ancestors.

On Sundays only did she take upon herself any state, and by her grandmother's express orders; she was always dressed as became Miss Balmaine, and occupied in solitary grandeur what had once been her grandmother's place in the family pew. She sat there as the young regent who represented the absent sovereign of Horton. There were few people to behold her save the villagers, who remembered her as an infant—remembered her first attendance in church, when she made audible remarks about the gentleman in his nightgown, *i.e.* Mr. Cameron in his surplice, and had had to be removed screaming. Now every Sunday she was conducted to her seat with as much pomp as if she had been a young duchess, decorously sat out the long morning service, the rector's fifty-minute sermon, without a yawn, much less a scream.

She looked like a sunbeam among her musty old surroundings. Ronald Gordon glanced at her in astonishment, as he took his seat at the opposite end of the pew. Was this young lady in a dainty white hat, a soft silky dress, made in the latest fashion, and long gloves, armed with a fan and scent-bottle—(Mrs. Balmaine insisted on these items; part of her own, so to speak, regalia)—sitting in majestic possession of this imposing pew—was she the same girl he had met with the streaming hair, and cotton gown, miles away on the Marshes?

Of course she was. She coloured deeply as their eyes met—a colour which went and came in her cheeks like a revolving lighthouse; and her heart, for some reason she could not explain to herself, throbbed unusually fast. She did not venture to join (as was her custom) in the old hymns of Weyman's "Melodia Sacra." She was far too nervous; indeed, she could scarcely find her pocket, and her half-crown for the copper warming-pan that was tendered for the collection. I am afraid her thoughts strayed a good deal during the service—so did Mr. Gordon's, so did those of many of the congregation.

What did it *mean?* they asked themselves. And even Mr. Cameron himself, as he adjusted his spectacles, preparatory to the Second Lesson, wondered, as he glanced interrogatively at the good-looking young man in the pew with Rosamond, what it meant. Was he a chance stranger? Was he a lover? Was he an adventurer, who had heard of the fame and fortune of the Rose of Horton? No, he did not look like *that.* He was a gentleman, and to all appearance as well born as herself. The shape of his head, the cast of his features, his easy bearing, with the eyes of the whole

congregation upon him—easy without swagger, self-possessed without conceit—pointed to what old Mr. Cameron secretly worshipped, though he would have been shocked to aver it—race and good blood.

Of course he had not time to make all these mental memoranda at once. He made them by degrees (chiefly during the singing), and he had finally decided, by the time he ascended the pulpit, that the stranger was a suitor for Rosamond, who had apparently dropped from the clouds.

After the sermon the congregation scattered out, and were followed at a distance by Rosamond and Mr. Gordon. In the porch he halted and spoke to her, and asked, "If she were none the worse for her fright on Tuesday, and if she had ventured on the Marshes since?"

"No, she had not," she returned; "and her grandmother had been so very grateful to him, and said she would like to see him. But not to-day," she went on quickly; "she never, never sees any one on Sunday. And perhaps on week days you are busy?"

"I shall make time—never fear," he replied. "I'll come over on Tuesday afternoon, if I may? What a strange old place this is—the village and church," he added. "I never saw anything the least like it before. Those were the monuments of your ancestors, I suppose, that you sat below?"

At this instant the young people were joined by Mr. Cameron, who had hurried out of the vestry, and now came up, holding out his hand to Rosamond, and looking very hard at her companion.

"This is the gentleman who saved me from being robbed, and perhaps murdered, on the Marshes—Mr. Gordon—Mr. Cameron."

Mr. Gordon bowed, but Mr. Cameron exclaimed, "Good heavens, Rosamond! Robbed and murdered! What on earth do you mean?"

"I mean that on Friday evening, about three miles from here, a horrid man stopped me in a lane and made me give him my silver locket and belt, and ran after me, and wanted—wanted——"

She blushed scarlet, and stopped.

"Wanted what?"—hastily. "Get on, get on!"

"To—to kiss me—but—I'm sure he meant to murder me, only luckily this gentleman came up."

"Lucky for you, indeed! You've no business, Rosamond, to be rambling about the country in this way. In future I shall take you out with *me*. It was a most providential thing, sir, that you happened to be on the spot"—now addressing Mr. Gordon, and looking at him critically—"and I tender you my very hearty thanks"—drawing off his glove, and putting out his hand—"for I don't know"—smiling—"what we should all do if anything happened to Miss Rosamond. You are a stranger in these parts, I presume?"

"Yes, quite. I am down about the new railway, and I am only a bird of passage."

"Oh, the railway, eh?"—rather blankly. Down fell a pretty castle in the air at that one word. "And where are you stopping?"

"At Atherton—a small village."

"Atherton! Um! Why, it's a good five miles from here. You've had a *long* walk to church"—impressively.

"Oh"—colouring—"I am a first-rate walker. I think nothing of that, and I've heard so much of Horton Church that I thought I would come over to service." (It is to be feared that this was not strictly the truth;

it is possible that Horton contained another attraction beside St. Martin's Early Norman edifice, *i.e.* the young lady who was standing with downcast eyes, and her hand on the top of the lych gate.)

"You had better come home and take lunch with me," said the rector, hospitably. "I dare say old Martha can bring us in a cold fowl, or tongue, or something, and if you like I can tell you all about the church —it's a most ancient and interesting edifice," added the rector, whose one hobby, beside botany, was the ancient grey building behind him.

Mr. Gordon gratefully accepted the offer, and, with a reluctant good-bye to Miss Balmaine—whose home lay in an opposite direction — followed the rector across the flagged pathway of a very crowded churchyard.

CHAPTER IV.

IT was a remarkable coincidence that, as the rector and his guest were passing down the flats at the back of the Manor, and discussing Early Norman arches and flying buttresses, a white figure should be leaning over the old wooden garden gate—quite accidentally, we do assure you!

"There is Miss Rose. Poor child! it would be a charity to take her for a walk. I fancy she is afraid to venture out alone," remarked Mr. Cameron. "I'll beckon her," which he did, suiting the action to the word, with a big blackthorn stick, and in five minutes Miss Rose, with cheeks the colour of her name, and slightly out of breath, was beside them.

She and the rector put the stranger a good long way on the road home; but the time passed so quickly, that they seemed to have been only a quarter of an hour in company, when Mr. Cameron halted at a cross-road, and cried—

"Hold, enough!"

It was a novel experience to Rosamond to be walking along between two men, conversing and laughing and listening, instead of moping round the garden all alone. True, she could have walked now and then with Mr. Cameron, but he generally preferred to do his botanizing by himself; and she dared not tell herself bluntly that

all her delight was entirely derived from the society of the stranger. He had much to say—he had travelled and read; and from the way he talked to learned Mr. Cameron, she was convinced that he was clever. To Rosamond it was like breathing another atmosphere to meet another young fellow-creature who had all the summer days of life before him, like herself; who carried a light heart in his bosom, and looked on the world with smiling and expectant eyes; who was not crippled by gout or rheumatism, but could jump and run, and did not talk of "old times," as one who had done with life and living, like all her grandmother's household, instead of being ready to enjoy and make the most of the present hour, as *she* was. Indeed, each was conscious of a growing interest in the other.

"What a delicious evening!" he said to himself, as he walked along the narrow, grass-lined road. Never had a way seemed so short, nor the time passed so rapidly. But all things, no matter *how* agreeable, have an ending; and whilst the rector was poking some weeds out of a ditch, Mr. Gordon found time to say, "I shall see you again on Tuesday," ere he wrung her hand in a much stronger grasp than he was aware of, and wished her good-bye.

The promised visit to Madam Balmaine was duly paid; but alas! he came early, and Rosamond was out—had gone into the village on an errand for her grandmother. Mr. Gordon was ushered in by Maggs, and conducted upstairs to the old lady's own sanctum, where he found her sitting by the window in a high-backed chair.

The room was large, panelled with oak, and looked out on the pleasure-ground; the windows were narrow and small; all round the lower parts of the walls ran a

set of book-cases, crammed with a quantity of musty-looking books—travels, *Ramblers*, *Spectators*, and ancient sermons. Over the book-cases hung many sporting coloured prints; stuffed foxes' heads and brushes, whips and horseshoes, testified to some one's taste for hunting; and on the floor, over the carpet, was the tanned skin of an old piebald horse. Mr. Gordon never dreamt that these were the household treasures of the tottering old lady who had risen to receive him, and was quavering out her thanks in a high, chirrupy voice. Maggs would have liked to have remained in the room, but was imperiously dismissed, and took her departure most reluctantly, for this was what she called "one of madam's bad days, when she was a little queer in her head."

After discoursing quite rationally for a considerable time, the old lady suddenly paused, and, staring hard at her visitor, exclaimed, *apropos* of nothing—

"Poor Jack Fletcher! Yes; he is like poor Jack! But looks are nothing! Ay, Jack was as good a man on a horse as ever put his foot in a stirrup! This fellow! what is he? On the railway! New-fangled rubbish! But he looks like a gentleman! I dare say"—chuckling foolishly—"he is taken by her pretty face, as many a one will be. That's what brings *him* here! But that's nothing!"—uttering her thoughts aloud, with her eyes fixed upon the garden. "I dare say I did wrong to ask him up. But she is out; there's no great harm done. He is just the sort of young spark to take a girl's eye. But Rose must marry a lord, not a common man on a railway! No, no, no!"—again chuckling inanely.

Ronald Gordon listened to this soliloquy in stupefied amazement. The old lady gabbled on so fast that she

had poured out sentence after sentence before he had time to rally himself.

"She is out of her mind; she is in her dotage, poor old woman!" he said to himself, rising. "And I won't stay here; it's as bad as eavesdropping."

He made a halting speech about getting back to his work, his time not being his own, and hastily took his departure. That room was the Palace of Truth, and no mistake; and he did not relish the situation.

"Come back! come back!" shrieked Madam Balmaine, as he closed the door. "He has not had any cake or wine. He *must* have cake and wine! Maggs, Maggs!" —tearing at the bell.

But he did not return; and Maggs, meeting him on the stairs, gleaned from his face that "the old lady had been a bit queer."

In the hall he encountered Rosamond.

"Oh, how early you have come!" she exclaimed, in a tone of keen disappointment. "I suppose you have paid your visit to grandmamma, and are going away?"

To which he replied that he had just taken leave.

"I will let you out by the garden, then," she said; "it's a short cut"—leading the way down some steps, a long, narrow passage, and out of a glass door into the pleasure-ground, then along the broad walk to the gate; very, very slowly they went, like a pair of snails, and for fully five minutes they stood before the wicket ere he opened it and passed out.

"Five, if not *ten*," said Maggs to herself, as she watched them impatiently from an upper window. "Here is pretty work!"

There were a good many meetings after this, of which she was not a spectator.

Mr. Cameron accompanied Rosamond out botanizing (and it was a remarkable fact that they almost always accidentally fell in with Mr. Gordon, who would happen to be surveying in the same locality), and the poor purblind rector would go along rooting and picking among ferns and mosses, and examining objects with his microscope, with great minuteness, and never seeing what was so plain and glaring under his very nose, viz. that the young couple, his companions, had fallen head over ears in love with each other.

At first Ronald Gordon felt pity and admiration for the forlorn, companionless girl, buried alive in that remote village; but pity is notoriously akin to something else —which in his case followed with extraordinary rapidity. And she—she had never met any one near her own age before, to whom she could talk freely, for "friendships" and "English conversation" were alike forbidden at school; and she prattled away (whilst old Mr. Cameron groped in the hedge-rows) about all her small joys and sorrows, her trivial hopes and fears, and showed her new acquaintance the mirror of a mind that was startlingly clear and transparent. Needless to pause and trace the rapid steps by which they fell in love, and went through the first (to them both) delightful experience of "Love's Young Dream." Mr. Gordon had not the faintest idea that the pretty, simple girl to whom he had given his heart was an heiress. There was nothing in her surroundings—nothing in the severe, old-fashioned simplicity, nay, the threadbare shabbiness of the Manor House—to warrant such an idea. He imagined her to be a sort of poor relation, living on the bounty of old Madam Balmaine; and Mr. Cameron, who could have told another tale, was far too much

taken up in the active search for a rare lycopodium—said to have been heard of in the Marshes—to trouble his head about retailing village gossip.

Just at that juncture, this particular crisis, before a word had been spoken, or a hint given by Ronald, he received a sudden summons to London. His father was seriously ill, dying; and it was in answer to a little note from Mr. Gordon that Rosamond was hurrying over the grass with flying footsteps that summer afternoon. He was standing by a wooden foot-bridge, looking graver than usual, and advanced eagerly to meet her as she approached.

"Forgive me," were the first words he uttered, "for sending for you in such a cavalier fashion, but necessity knows no law. I must go to London by the mail—a trap is waiting to take me over—but I could not go without a word with you. See"—beckoning up a splendid Gordon setter—"I have got you a guardian; his name is 'Roy.' You may wander far and wide in safety, and woe be to him who molests you, once you and Roy are friends. I got him down expressly for you, hoping your grandmother will allow you to accept him."

"Oh, thank you very, very much, Mr. Gordon," said Rosamond, gratefully. "What a beauty he is! Of course, grandmamma will allow me to have him. Poor grandmamma! her mind is odd; she does not understand *much* sometimes. But"—paling a little—"I hope your father is not very ill?"

"I hope not, for he is all I have in the world—the only tie I have in England. But for him, I would have been abroad long ago, to seek my fortune; but I shall never leave him as long as he lives."

"And when he is better, will you come back?" she faltered.

"That will depend on *you*, Miss Balmaine"—looking at her steadily.

"On me?" she echoed breathlessly, and colouring to the hue of the sunset behind her.

"You know very well that I love you, and if you will love me, and say you will marry me some day, I shall return. I would not ask you this so suddenly, but for circumstances; and you have no one to appeal to—no relations, I may say, or friends, nothing to ask but your own heart. I am not rich, but I know I shall get on, and you have not been accustomed to luxury. What do you say, Rosamond?" he asked eagerly, his face white with emotion.

Rosamond made no immediate reply with her lips, but her answer was written in her eyes, and presently she placed a timid little hand in his, and whispered "Yes"—a faint, almost inaudible, "Yes."

"You are not saying this because I am the only man you have ever seen, Rose, darling? Tell me *truly* now, and don't let me find it out afterwards, when it would kill me—my lovely, little, wild Rose. Are you sure you love me?"

"Quite sure," she whispered.

Then they sealed their troth with a kiss—with half a dozen on his side—and Rosamond shed a few tears as they said good-bye on the narrow wooden foot-bridge, by the light of a gorgeous crimson and gold sunset. Five minutes later, Miss Balmaine, leading her new guardian by a chain, was running home across the marshes, with wet eyes and a throbbing heart—no less a person than "an engaged young lady."

CHAPTER V.

ROSAMOND carried her weighty secret in her own bosom for many days, and lived in a condition of absolute mental beatitude. "Her mind to her a kingdom was," and she spent her time in making friends with Roy, thinking of Ronald, and helping to nurse her grandmother, for the old lady's mind had completely given way, and she was now unmistakably in her second childhood.

She had had letters from Ronald—long letters. How greedily she devoured them! How often she went over—how she read, and re-read, favourite parts—people not in love would hardly believe. After lingering in an imbecile condition for several months, old Mrs. Balmaine died, and Rosamond was left entirely alone, and dependent upon her own resources. Mr. Cameron was kind and sympathetic, but he would have been kinder, and more thoughtful for her welfare, had she been a rare British fern; and the Blacks were a couple who were always wrapped up in themselves and their imaginary ailments. Mrs. Black had recently discovered that "she had something the matter with her heart," but it never occurred to her for one second that her pretty young neighbour was suffering from a malignant attack on the same organ. She saw that her mourning was sufficiently deep, that she confined her walks to

the garden only, for ten days after her grandmother's death, and that she wrote to India on proper black-edged paper. If you had asked Mrs. Black, she would have emphatically assured you that, in spite of her own delicate health, she had taken the deepest interest in the girl, and been to her as a mother; she had lent her the "Waverley" novels, and thrice in three months she invited her to tea. Not long after Mrs. Balmaine's death, Ronald Gordon's father died of that slow but sure disease, creeping paralysis, and the young couple who met once more at the foot-bridge in the waning November afternoon, were both in deep mourning, and both alone in the world; for Mrs. Brice seemed in no hurry to return to England (her mother-in-law's will was not to be read till a year after her funeral had taken place—Kitty Balmaine had carried her eccentricities even beyond the grave), and she had a step-daughter, whom she was most anxious to launch into matrimony before she set her face homeward; little thinking of her own daughter, living all alone in the dreary Manor House, who might be getting into any amount of mischief.

No, Mrs. Brice was fond of India, and especially of Mussoori, which some one scornfully terms the "Margate of the East!" At picnics and dances, the well-preserved, sharp-tongued lady found partners and admirers: for she gave excellent dinners, was always smartly dressed, and invariably in possession of the latest gossip and the newest good story. She resolved to make the very most of her last year in India, ere she went home to take up the post of chaperone to her own —alas! grown-up daughter. Meanwhile the girl could get on very well at Horton; and in such a forsaken, out-of-the-way corner, there was not the smallest chance

of her becoming entangled with any one. Was there not?

To return to the young couple on the bridge.

"I have one piece of bad news for you, Rosamond," he said gravely, after their first greeting was over, "and one good bit, and one which is neither good or bad; which will you have first?"

"Oh, the good, of course," she answered promptly.

"How tall and grown-up you look in this long black gown," he remarked, gazing at her thoughtfully.

"But I *am* grown-up," she answered eagerly. "Nearly eighteen, if you please; and now tell me what your news is at once."

"The news is this. I have been offered a first-rate appointment on a railway in New Zealand, and am going to accept it. I shall make quite a little fortune out there; but I shall—and here is a bit of bad news, darling—I shall be away at least two years."

"Yes; but you will take me?" she returned decidedly

"No, no, you must not talk of it; you must not tempt me. It would be out of the question. Out there I shall be living in a log hut, or a tent, all my time, and in the bush among navvies, roughing it in the fullest sense of the word. You will be patient, Rosamond; it will be easier for you than for me."

"But why must you go?"

"For your sake, Rosie, that you may begin life with a good start. Remember, you are not eighteen yet, and I am only seven and twenty."

"Two years will pass like two centuries," she interrupted, tears now rolling down her cheeks. "Supposing you were to die, away from every one in that far-off country, no friends, no one near you."

"I must take my chance, like every one else," he said gravely. "The time, you will find, will run round faster than you imagine."

"And for two whole years?" she cried incredulously.

"Yes; I have signed an agreement to that effect, and without telling you, for fear my courage would fail; so it's done, and cannot be undone."

"And when must you go?"

"In a month," was the brief reply.

"Oh, Ronald! How *could* you do it? and leave me all alone in the world?"—and she leant on the rail of the bridge, buried her face in her hands, and sobbed bitterly.

There was something suspiciously like tears in Ronald's eyes, as he made a great effort over himself, and said in a firm voice—

"It was on your account that I did it, Rosamond."

"Then it was very cruel and wicked of you," she retorted passionately. "I am not afraid of being poor."

"But I am. I know what poverty is; you do not—it has never approached you. And when it comes in at the door, you know *what* happens."

"And two whole years!" she continued between her sobs. "My mother will be home, and you don't know what she is, or what she may make me do. I had—and this is my bad news—a letter from her last mail, and Ronald, she won't hear of my being engaged to you! She is dreadfully, dreadfully angry, and says she forbids me ever to see you again, or to write to you"—producing from her pocket as she spoke a thin, much-crossed scratchy-looking letter. "But I won't give you up. I have never even seen her; she does not seem like my mother, and I—I love you. But, dear Ronald, don't go away and leave me, for you don't know—what may

happen. I have no strength of character, as grandmamma used to say. I am *always* led, whether I like it or not."

"Do you mean to tell me that you can't answer for your own constancy?" he asked rather sternly. "Because you had better say so at once, and tell me the truth plainly. Better let me go *now*, than keep me on, merely to cast off in after years."

"Oh, Ronald, how can you look at me like that! I declare you frighten me. You know I shall never love any one else—never; but I might be *made* to marry some one. Remember, I am only an ignorant country girl, with no one but you for my friend"—now taking his hand in both of hers, and looking at him appealingly—"and there will be three to one—mother, and Colonel Brice and Miss Brice; and they all declare I must make such a grand match—that I must marry a lord. Grandmamma used to say it over and over again. I wonder why? Poor grandmamma—*she* did not understand; but Mrs. Black and Maggs and my mother are always harping on the same string. Oh, Ronald, dear Ronald, *can* you not stay? can you not change your mind?" she pleaded piteously.

(Thus did poor Rosamond deliver her views and sentiments with a charming disregard of conventional restraint.)

"No, no; I never change my mind," he answered firmly. "Come, the evening is getting dusk, and I will walk home with you. We will have no more meetings here. I shall come to the Manor to-morrow afternoon, and tell you all my plans."

And he was as good as his word. He went boldly to the front door with a loud knock and a pealing ring, and asked to see Miss Balmaine.

"Miss Balmaine was in the garden,"—not hanging out the clothes,—but sauntering up and down the middle walk with a red shawl over her head, and her faithful dog beside her; and up and down the walk Ronald and Rosamond paced for more than an hour, talking, disputing, yielding, arguing. The upshot of it all was this. Ronald had been weighing in his own mind what Rosamond had told him the previous evening, her fears that her will, but not her love, would be crushed by her mother. She was of a timid, yielding disposition, the opposite to his own, and he used his knowledge of her character to some purpose, for when they walked up the garden for the last time, she being rosy, and he rather pale, they had decided to be married that day fortnight.

But Rosamond was still to be left behind, and after a year, at most (all being well), and when he had smoothed the way, she was to come out and join him. This was the bait he offered, a bait which gained her consent to all his plans—plans he had laid down, and thought out as he walked the marshes for hours the previous evening. Being his *wife*, she would be safe from the matrimonial designs of her Indian relatives, and being his beloved Rosamond, she would be constant, not merely by her inclination, but her vows.

Miss Balmaine had been asked to pay a visit of a week or two near London with her former governess, by way of a little change; she would accept the invitation, remain a few days, and walk out and be married some morning; and they would run over, and spend their honeymoon in Paris, where he would show her a glimpse of the world at last. Every point in this scheme had been disputed by Rosamond, and every

point she had yielded but one, and this was, that the marriage was to be kept a secret from every one—"No one was to know," she declared; "not Miss Phipps, not Maggs, not even Mr. Cameron."

She would keep her maiden name until her mother came home, and then she would reveal the fact; but in the meantime she would rather be known as Miss Balmaine than as Mrs. Gordon.

"Not very complimentary is it to *me*, Rosie, that you would rather keep your own name than mine."

"It is not that, it is not that," she said eagerly; "but I should hate to be pointed at as a bride without a husband."

"I think you had much better get it over first than last," he returned. "However, I must give in, I suppose, as you have conceded so much. All the same, Rosie darling, I think you are *wrong*. I have hardly any friends, so it does not matter; but I think you *might* tell Mr. Cameron."

"No, I won't," she returned with a pout; "and if you are disagreeable I shall not marry you at all. Fancy being married, Ronald!"—stopping in the path and looking at him with a smile. "How funny it will be! I shall wear my wedding ring round my neck—like a girl that I read of the other day. Rosamond Gordon—it sounds well."

"Yes, doesn't it? You remember, my darling, I had two bits of news——"

"Yes, yes; but no more news to-day, please."

"It's about a property—in our family. However, it is not likely to come to us, or affect us in any way, but the family solicitor sent for my address. Now I hear five striking—I must be going. I have a great deal to

do before this day week. I shall meet you, of course, at Foxhill station, and we can travel up together to Miss Phipps's door."

"Come in first, and have a cup of tea. You must —you shall. It is *my* house now," she urged—"at least, for the present. Never mind Maggs."

CHAPTER VI.

A WEEK later saw Rosamond in London. She had never been in any big town in her life, and was like a child gazing with round-eyed wonder at the crowds in the streets, and the immense traffic that thundered up and down them. Prim Miss Phipps lived in a somewhat remote part of Bayswater, and little suspected the plot in private life that was being carried out under her roof—nor the real reason why her pretty guest flushed up every time the postman's knock resounded through the shallow house. Ronald Gordon was anxious that she should be allowed to share the secret; but Rosamond said no. She still stood in awe of her former English governess, and could not screw up her courage, though she determined to do so several times; she was afraid that Miss Phipps would not hear of the proposed marriage (there was no Ronald to talk *her* over). She would insist on Rosamond's waiting for her coming of age, or her mother's consent, and she would lose Ronald. So she assured herself, as she weighed two alternatives, one of which was to make a clean breast of everything to her hostess, and the other to deceive her and keep her in the dark. She chose the *latter*, and pretending that she must return to Horton, and bring her visit to an abrupt conclusion (as she had an important appointment to keep), she left Miss Phipps one morning, ostensibly

en route to catch the early train. At the station she was met by Ronald with a carriage and pair. It was a dull November morning, and the fog was so thick they could scarcely see across the street. The church to which they drove was lit by gas—at least as much of it as was necessary for the ceremony—and Ronald and Rosamond were married by special licence, with no one present but the clerk and the pew-opener.

This handsome young couple had apparently no friends—or were they making a runaway match? The man appeared well able to take care of himself and his affairs, and evidently belonged to the "upper ten;" the girl seemed bewildered and nervous, but looked both happy and pretty; and as her husband gave her his arm, and led her down the aisle, it was easy for any one to see that it was a real old-fashioned love-match. After the ceremony, they drove to Victoria as rapidly as the fog permitted, arrived at the Lord Warden at Dover, and crossed by the mail-boat to Paris.

It was all like a dream to Rosamond. The bright Rue de Rivoli, the dazzling shops, the concerts, operas, picture galleries—was this in the same world, the same planet, as Horton? How proud she was of her wedding ring—and of Ronald! How well he contrasted with other people in *her* opinion! How clever he was! He spoke French like a native; he told her all that was interesting about places and pictures and people. Her mind resembled a flower that has been kept in a dull, dark place, and now opening itself in the sun. She felt miserably stupid, childish, and *gauche*, but in reality she was none of the three. She had an inborn grace of manner, a natural good breeding, and an air of distinction (mere child as she looked) that tided her over

difficulties; and Ronald heard many laudatory remarks on his beautiful wife.

She had never seen Ronald in evening dress—that touchstone of a gentleman—until they went to Paris. It suited him well, and she was the cynosure of most eyes when they appeared in public at theatres, which delighted our country damsel even more than operas and concerts. She understood and could read French perfectly, but to speak it she did not dare. The Gordons stayed at the Bristol, had a carriage and pair every day, went to everything worth seeing, and were taken, from their appearance, to be wealthy English people of position—a not unnatural mistake, judging from Rosamond's refined type of beauty and Ronald's clear-cut features and high-bred air, that did not belie the good blood in his veins.

Being incessantly engaged, time had wings for the young couple, and passed far, far too quickly. Far, far too soon was the day approaching when they must tear themselves away from that brilliant city, and *part*—he, to cross ten thousand miles of ocean; she, to return to her semi-vegetable life at Horton. However, they made the most of the flying hours—and "one is not always young, and does not always have a honeymoon," said Ronald; "and let to-morrow take care of itself."

Before leaving Paris, they had one small, and not strictly speaking agreeable, adventure.

They had been to see the celebrated *Sara* at the Porte St. Martin Theatre, and coming away the crowd was immense. Ronald begged his wife to remain in a kind of niche on the grand staircase, whilst he fought his way to the front, and called their carriage. But Rosamond was a too attractive-looking young lady to be

left alone in such a public place. She was not molested by the natives of gallant France, but by two young men from her own country, who, seeing an extremely pretty, timid-looking girl waiting rather aloof and alone, accosted her with vulgar compliments, and pressing entreaties to be allowed to be of service, and fetch her carriage, and to see her home.

Mrs. Ronald Gordon had no presence of mind, and no courage. She was still a shy, country girl, except when Ronald was by to back her up; and very lovely she looked as she stood on the stairs, wrapped in her fur-trimmed mantle, and holding her head rather high, but all the time trembling from head to foot, and searching vainly in the crowd for her husband with beautiful startled eyes.

One of her persecutors was far more obnoxious than the other. He was short, and rather stout, with prominent goggling blue eyes and eye-glass, thin light hair, ditto moustache, a shiny red complexion, very large pointed patent-leather shoes, and enormous ears—his ears were his great feature.

He was saying, "Permettez-moi! 'Pon my honour—now, it's no good waiting for him; he has met another lady, you'll find—you'd *much* better let me take you in charge, eh?"—offering his arm; but in a moment he was violently thrust aside, so violently that a mere accident prevented him from rolling all the way downstairs—a shove, as he subsequently expressed it, "that nearly knocked all the breath out of his body, and sent him flying into the middle of next week."

A shove administered by an extremely angry young man, who, calling him an infernal scoundrel and an unmitigated cad, in a low voice shaking with passion, had

led the beautiful vision in dark furs promptly downstairs, put her into a little brougham, and followed her himself, before he and his companion had realized the fact.

"They frightened me dreadfully, Ronald," said Mrs. Gordon, tremulously. "They looked so horrid, and were so familiar, and I *never* saw them before. I didn't know them!"

"And I hope you never will"—emphatically. "*Brutes!*—only you were with me, I'd have knocked that little goggle-eyed chap down, and kicked him into the street. These are the snobs—the 'Arrys,' who give us such a bad name abroad; and no wonder. A fellow who behaved as that one did to you ought to get twelve months' imprisonment, with hard labour. I'd like to go back now, and thrash him soundly."

Rosamond earnestly begged her husband to allow his wrath to cool, and not to be so very angry. "It was all over now."

"Another girl would have been able to stand up for herself," he said discontentedly; "but you are such a little chicken-hearted creature! Any one can see with half an eye that they may impose on you—and they do. I am glad now that I married you offhand—for I am certain you would have been frightened into taking the first fellow Mrs. Brice told to try his fortune—anything rather than say *no*."

"Well, I did not say no to *you*," she returned laughing, "so I do not see why you should scold and grumble. As to those odious young men, I shall never see them again, nor trouble my head about them."

"I don't half like leaving behind such a pretty wife as you are, Rosie. I would give anything now if I were

not going; but go I must, I have burned my boats. I hate—yes, *hate*—to think of other men dancing with you, admiring you, or even talking to you. You see, I am a regular Othello."

"There are not likely to be many dances, or many men at Horton, are there, you silly old Ronald?"

"No, that's one comfort," he rejoined, with a sigh of relief. "I don't suppose you will see any one but Dr. Black and Mr. Cameron between this and midsummer."

"You would like to lock me up, and keep me in a convent, I do believe, Ronald. How horrid of you! And I don't mind how many ladies you see out there."

"Oh, that is another matter. As long as we are together I don't care; but you are like a child when you are left by yourself. As to my seeing any ladies in the bush, it is improbable; a shepherd's wife will be the nearest approach to one, and I doubt if I shall even come across her. At any rate, I can take care of myself. I wish I could say the same for *you*. Here we are at the Bristol. I hope we shall be able to get some supper."

CHAPTER VII.

ONE bleak afternoon early in December, Ronald Gordon was steaming down the English Channel in one of the largest of the P. and O. Company steamers, bound for Melbourne, *viâ* the Suez Canal. A man is denied the feminine relief of tears, but something very *like* them burned in Ronald's eyes as he watched the white cliffs of England fading out of sight. He bent over the ship's side, gazing at each yard of green water as it glided past, and thought, "Now I am so much further from Rosamond." Days crawled by, and he was thousands of miles from Rosamond; but he kept up his heart by writing her long, long letters, and saying to himself, "Only a year."

As for Rosamond, who had returned to Horton and her daily dry routine of life, her black dresses for her grandmother, her gardening, her walks on the Marshes with Roy—she felt quite certain that her heart would ak; she dared not give way to violent and unre- ined sorrow, but she recouped herself when she far away from human eyes, with no one to witness grief but a dog. She would sit for hours in her room, or on the high shingly beach, watching the try sea, the out-going steamers, and weep unre- inedly. Of course, her eyes told a tale to Maggs, observant.

"I can't think *what's* come to your eyes, Miss Rosamond," she remarked irritably. "You have got some sort of inflammation in the lids. You wouldn't believe the show you look; it's all along of going prowling out in these bitter winds."

But though she kept her young lady at home, strange to say, her eyes were as inflamed as ever, especially in the morning, when Rosamond had been crying half the night. Luckily for her, Maggs could not read, and the thick letters from Suez and Colombo that came to her young mistress, she attributed to her mistress's very indifferent mamma.

Rosamond's Parisian costumes—Ronald's gifts—some pretty ornaments, shoes, fans, handkerchiefs, were all securely locked away in an old press in her room. Sometimes she took them out and looked at them with a beating heart and misty eyes; one evening she even went so far as to dress herself in her white silk and opera cloak, gloves and shoes, and *pretend*—what a miserable pretence it was!—that she was waiting for Ronald's knock at the door, to know if she was ready.

There was a lovely fan, bought that day in the Rue de la Paix, a fur and velvet wrap for cold drives in the Bois, her everyday dress from the "Maison Roger;" there were photographs of all the places they had visited—Père la Chaise, la Sainte Chapelle, Versailles, St. Cloud, Fontainebleau, photographs of themselves, large cabinet size, *not* taken together in the orthodox French fashion. There was a Russian leather album, a work-basket, a butterfly brooch, a golden rose pin. Oh, Ronald had spent his hard-earned money like a prince! "But never mind," as he said to his disturbing conscience, "*she* has never seen anything; she has had so

little pleasure. I shall never have such a chance again. One is not married every day, and I can work and make it up, when she is not with me."

At length Colonel and Mrs. and Miss Brice came home rather suddenly. The colonel's constitution showed symptoms of breaking up—late hours, rich dishes, and frequent whisky pegs, began to tell, and the doctors said, "You have no time to lose if you want to get better; you must go home, my dear sir, and *stay* there."

So Mrs. Brice reluctantly broke up her house, sent round a list of her belongings, from a grand piano to a mouse-trap; "stuck" her friends most fearfully, they subsequently declared, in cows, poultry, and ponies, and got into her dandy for the last time, and was carried down the hill to the dak gharry. English people at home know nothing of dandies or dak gharries, and so much the better for them; but Mrs. Brice left her heart (such as it was) in the East, and felt as if the best part of her life was gone when Colaba Lighthouse sank from view. She was aware that the bulk of the old lady's fortune had been left to Rosamond, and had had a most interesting interview with the late Mrs. Balmaine's solicitors. The interest of her capital amounted to more than £5000 a year, and the principal was left in trust for Rosamond until she attained the age of twenty-five—or married meanwhile. Needless to remark, it was not Mrs. Brice's intention that her daughter should marry until she was twenty-five, if then. She would have the fingering and the spending of her daughter's income for nearly seven years. She would take her into society (for she loved society herself), they would all live together in a nice house in London, keep a carriage, entertain a little, go out a great deal, dress well, dine

well, go to the theatres and see all the new pieces, take a trip abroad in the winter, and enjoy themselves most thoroughly on Rosamond's fortune. It was a long time since such a slice of luck had fallen to Mrs. Brice. She established herself at a fashionable hotel in Northumberland Avenue, where she desired her daughter and Maggs to join her. Rosamond looked forward to, yet dreaded, this meeting with her mother. What would she be like? Would she be nice and kind and tender-hearted, a real mother? Then she would go down on her knees to her, and put her head in her lap, and tell her about Ronald, dear Ronald. She carried his letters from Suez and Colombo all day long inside the bosom of her dress. If her mother were sympathetic, and if it were true that grandmamma was so rich, perhaps she would let her have a little money—enough to keep Ronald in in England. Oh, to telegraph for him, and bring him back! The very idea made her heart bound.

The eventful day, when Rosamond was to meet her mother, arrived at last. She and Maggs travelled up to London, and arrived at the Métropole Hotel shortly before dinner. Miss Balmaine was ushered into a lift, and soon found herself on the second landing, walking —lagging—behind a servant, who was about to show her into a private sitting-room, occupied by number forty-one, Colonel and Mrs. Brice.

As Rosamond followed the man along the carpeted corridor, her heart was seemingly in her throat, her knees were trembling under her. How much depended upon this imminent interview and first impressions!

In the sitting-room, awaiting the anxious stranger, were Colonel, Mrs. and Miss Brice. Colonel Brice was a portly man of sixty, with a "My dear fellow!" manner,

a loud hearty voice, a bald head (across which some stray locks were carefully trained), and a pair of hard black eyes. All his life he had been in debt. He had been in debt at school; debt had become second nature to him, and he was as full of expedients as a native cook, and a great big bill had no terrors for Colonel Brice; he always contrived, as he expressed it, to "scrape along somehow." His effusive manner, his assurance, his first-rate (unpaid) tailor, and his hearty voice, extricated him from serious difficulties. He had held good appointments, and drawn good pay, entertained the right people —*en prince*. What matter about his debts, his creditors? When he was a young man every one was in debt. But Nemesis overtook him. Soucars have long arms and sharp agents, and can reach English clients even when in London; and Colonel Brice found, to his intense dismay, that, of all his pension, he was only to receive three hundred pounds a year until his creditors were paid off (which would never be in his lifetime). And what was three hundred a year?

What a mercy it was that Theresa's daughter was an heiress, a minor till she was twenty-five! She would be able to keep them all going: her natural home was with her mother and her mother's family.

Colonel Brice was a fluent talker, an indifferent listener, and had a habit of breaking in to whatever other people were saying, with "Quite so, quite so," and continuing the conversation himself. This, and his habit of bragging and borrowing money, somewhat discounted his popularity; but, nevertheless, not a few people—his own contemporaries—declared that "he wasn't a bad sort of old chap in his way." Yes; but it did not answer to get into his way!

At the present moment he was walking and talking about the room, with his thumbs in his waistcoat pockets, wondering "when the dickens that girl would arrive," but silencing all replies and suggestions with "Quite so, quite so."

Mrs. Brice looked marvellously young to be the mother of a grown-up daughter. She had a neat little figure, regular features, fair hair, a small thin-lipped mouth, and a habitually discontented expression. Her friends declared that she was perfectly charming—these were usually people who had not long had the pleasure of her acquaintance; her enemies (a numerous body) declared that she was unscrupulous, false, absolutely heartless, and ridiculously vain.

On the present occasion she was awaiting the appearance of her unknown daughter with mingled feelings of curiosity and complacency. It was *her* daughter's fortune (as she impressed upon her husband) that would promote Colonel Brice and herself from cheap lodgings, and cabs, to a mansion and a carriage!

Mrs. Brice had a pension and small income amounting to three hundred a year; but this was scarcely sufficient to furnish her with gowns. She thoroughly understood the art of dressing and making the most of herself. At present she wore a smart afternoon costume, with a good deal of white about it; her abundant fair hair was arranged in the latest fashion. As she sat with the evening paper in her lap, and her eyes upon the door, she did not look a day older than five and thirty.

Miss Brice was eight and twenty. She had a wiry figure, a pair of round expressionless blue eyes, and a quantity of pretty light brown hair, a very sharp nose, a very sharp tongue, and the reputation of being the

best dancer in the whole of Bengal. Naturally she was not very enthusiastic with regard to the new member that was to be added to the family—a girl ten years younger than herself, pretty (if her photographs spoke the truth), and an heiress!

However, her fortune would not be in her own hands for some time; and when it was, she would be a capital wife for Ted.

The door opened, and a loud voice announced—

"Miss Balmaine."

Immediately afterwards a tall, dark, nervous-looking girl, in mourning, came hastily into the room.

"She looks like some wild creature," thought Mrs. Brice—"the image of Tom," and she gave a little cry as she got up, and held out both her jewelled hands. Then she kissed the girl on both cheeks, and holding her at arms' length, gravely surveyed her. She inspected her plain country-made mourning, her cheap black gloves, her diffident manner and deprecating glance. She appeared far more like some poor relation than the rich girl who was to maintain them all in affluence.

Rosamond was amazingly handsome, though rather thin and immature—a Balmaine, with dark hair and dark eyes.

When her stepfather had saluted her on the forehead, and Miss Brice on the cheek (the latter a cool salutation), Mrs. Brice led her daughter to the sofa, saying, "So we have met at last, Rosamond!" And once more taking her hands, gazed into her face critically. She was admiring the perfect form of the girl's profile, but there was no warmth in her glance, or her caress; and over the new arrival came a dull cold feeling of

disappointment, and that horrible lump once more began to make itself felt in her throat.

There sat her parent, surveying her unsmilingly (such a pretty, fashionable young woman, she could not realize that she *was* her mother); there stood Colonel Brice examining her with his eye-glasses, and talking in a very loud voice about the lateness of the train; and there was her future companion, Lizzie Brice, also contemplating her—and it appeared to her that there was more hostility than welcome in her glance, and that altogether she herself had failed to make a good impression.

"My dear Rosamond, how very strange it all seems, does it not?" said Mrs. Brice, with a little affected laugh. "I don't know how I shall ever get accustomed to such a tall, grave, grown-up daughter!"

Mrs. Brice did not care for the beautiful girl who sat beside her—no, no more than for the marble chimney-piece; she had no heart, maternal or otherwise. She did not regret the infant she had despatched to England years ago. She (*entre nous*) was delighted to be rid of it, and thought it a nuisance and an encumbrance. The only person she cared about was herself, and she had given but few thoughts to "the girl at Horton," as Colonel Brice called her.

Vanity, love of ease, and the flesh-pots of Egypt, embodied in many excellent *burra-khanas* in India, filled her stony bosom. She had been married (as we are aware) three times—first to handsome Tom Balmaine, then to Captain Evans of the Engineers, finally to Colonel Brice (of the Rajah of Powyan's body-guard). Her two first husbands she ruined by her extravagance; the third was a "take in." *He* thought Mrs. Evans, the

charming blonde-haired widow, had money; *she* believed him to be rich; and they were equally and painfully deceived: she the most of the two; for whereas she had a wealthy daughter in England—around whom were golden possibilities—he had, besides his debts, two grown-up children, a young man and a young woman, with very large ideas in the way of laying out other people's money,—and without a penny of their own.

It had been Mrs. Brice's ceaseless endeavour to launch Miss Brice into matrimony ere leaving India. She had left no stone unturned, no hill station in Upper India untried; she had carried her from Darjeeling to Murree, from Simla to Naini Tal, in vain; she had praised her, dressed her, paraded her; she had had young men to stay in the house; she had even undertaken a typhoid case and a polo accident;—but the gratitude of the young men just stopped short at Miss Brice's large white hand, and all Mrs. Brice's exertions had failed. Miss Brice, undoubtedly, was a perfect partner in a ballroom; her witticisms at other people's expense were most entertaining; but as a partner for life—no! Lizzie had sharp eyes, a sharp nose, and a sharp tongue; she never had a good word for any of her own sex; she took sevens in gloves; she took liberties with facts; and men (even young subalterns) were wise in their generation, and fled in time, and Miss Brice's temper and general amiability were not improved in consequence.

Miss Brice was not pleased to find that her stepmother's daughter was a strikingly pretty girl, though it gratified her to observe that she was sensitive, shy, and shrinking—unusual qualities in an heiress! but, then, Rosamond did not know that she had inherited all her grandmother's fortune. She believed, in the

innocence of her heart, that all Mrs. Balmaine's hoards had gone to her mother, and there was no one to disabuse her mind, for as yet the will had not been read. Mrs. Brice sat and gazed at her daughter, taking in every item of her pale, high-bred face, and making mental notes. She would create quite a sensation in the approaching season, if properly introduced. She was of a fashionable type of beauty now much in vogue, dark and classical. Who could tell where her triumphs might lead her—and them in her train? But she must not marry. No, no! Mrs. Brice—sharp-witted attorney's daughter—would take good care of that. Rosamond looked a timid, pliable sort of girl, easily alarmed, and led, and her mother felt, no doubt, that she would be able to manage her admirably. She was far better looking than she expected to find her—a feminine likeness of handsome Tom; but she was bashful, nervous, and silent, and had none of her father's force of character and indomitable will. "So much the better," said Mrs. Brice to herself, emphatically. "I will be very good to her. I shall be proud to show off my beautiful daughter. I shall lead her like a lamb, or a child of six years of age. I can read her disposition in her eyes. She shall have everything she wishes for—pretty dresses, pretty ornaments, a carriage, a maid, and any amount of amusement; but there is one thing she shall not have, for the next seven years, and that is—*a lover.*"

CHAPTER VIII.

IN a very short time the Brices and their belongings (an enormous amount of baggage, containing Bombay carvings, phoolcarries, jail carpets, tiger skins, the collection of twenty years' residence in India) moved into a fashionable furnished house near Queen's Gate, and set up a large staff of servants. At first, Mrs. Brice missed the capable, cheating khansamah (who sent up a first-rate dinner, never asked for a "Sunday out, or every Thursday evening," also beer and washing), and the ready khitmutghar, and meek and lowly ayah; but after a few weeks, she settled down, and ceased to order "tiffin" from the cook, or to tell the footman to say "Darwaza-bund," *i.e.* the polite Indian manner of saying "Not at home." Rosamond found that the days in Queen's Gate passed in quite a different fashion to those at Horton Manor. After a late breakfast, the ladies sallied out shopping; either to seek for bargains in "The Grove," or to the more expensive districts of Bond Street and Regent Street.

"They all wanted a complete outfit," quoth Mrs. Brice, "Rosamond included."

Rosamond's black was contemptuously put aside, and various smart coloured gowns were substituted (but she kept her Parisian treasures under lock and key, for as yet she had never dared to broach the subject of Ronald).

She was afraid of her mother, afraid of Lizzie, and, with all his apparent urbanity, desperately afraid of Colonel Brice. She had had one opening, but her heart had failed her when her mother drew her into her own room one day, and, solemnly closing the door, had said, with a judicial face—

"I want to speak to you *alone*, Rosamond, about that ridiculous letter you wrote me some months ago. I shall take no notice. I will pass over it, greatly displeased as I was. The mere idea of your thinking of a common, working engineer was perfectly monstrous, and you deserved to be put into a lunatic asylum! If you conduct yourself well, and please *me* in every respect, some day you will have a large fortune, and your husband (should you marry) will be, I trust, a man of position, possibly titled. I just called you in to tell you that I shall say no more about your silly letter," she continued, condescendingly, "and we need never refer to the subject again. You mentioned that he was leaving the country, and so much the better; the further he is away, the better I am pleased."

Rosamond listened with a scared, white face. She felt that she must speak. She opened her lips, but no sound came; her mouth felt dry, her tongue paralyzed; no, not one single word could she articulate, poor coward!

Just at this moment the door opened to admit Miss Brice, with a new hat on her head, and one in either hand.

"These are the new hats," she said; "Louise has sent them for me to see at home, and I want to know *which* you think the most becoming, the blue with wings or the dark red with poppies? Rosamond can buy whichever I don't take. She wants a new hat, that

black thing she wears might do for a charwoman!" And Rosamond's grand opportunity was gone for the present, thanks to her cowardice, and thanks to Miss Brice and her millinery.

The days at Queen's Gate were filled with shopping in the morning (as we have stated) and a late lunch, a drive in a close carriage (at present hired), calls, five-o'clock tea, and home to dinner, and bed. Mrs. Brice was arduously hunting up old Indian friends (of any social importance, *that* is understood), and floating herself off in the best society she could command. She rented a pew in a fashionable church, and attended service with regularity; she patronized bazaars and charitable concerts. She took the large corner house in Queen's Gate on lease, furnished it with great magnificence, and was "at home" every Tuesday evening from five till seven. They lived in a constant whirl, always busy, always deeply engaged, but never doing anything of any real importance. What a difference from the long drawn out, monotonous hours at Horton; and yet with all these inmates surrounding her, Rosamond felt quite as lonely as she had done there. Her heart did not warm to any of her associates, they seemed to belong to another world, and she dared not speak to any one of what her thoughts were always full—Ronald.

* * * * *

"Teddy was coming home!" From what part of the globe was not stated, but the news "that Teddy was coming home" had been dinned into Rosamond's ears a dozen times at least. He was undoubtedly a person of importance, for there was a great fuss made about his room, and there was a good deal of talk in one way or another of "Ted." Rosamond did not feel the smallest

interest in his arrival. Her mind was on the rack about the Australian mail; there had not been a line from Ronald for six weeks. Why, *why* did he not write? Surely the next mail must bring her long, long letters.

Going into the drawing-room one evening a little later than usual, just before dinner, she found the home circle assembled, and Ted—Ted standing with his back to the fire, and haranguing his relatives in an authoritative manner. He looked up sharply as the door opened and admitted a very pretty, tall girl, in a black gown, who advanced into the room with a somewhat abstracted air. Their eyes met, and he dropped his coat tails and started as if he had been shot; and she, on her part, came to a dead halt in the middle of the room, as if she had been turned into stone. They had naturally recognized one another. She saw in him the odious little goggle-eyed wretch who had accosted her in the vestibule of the Porte St. Martin theatre, and he beheld once more before him the beautiful vision, whose cavalier had handled him so roughly. However, they recovered quickly from their amazement, and were formally introduced, Miss Balmaine merely acknowledging the ceremony by a haughty bow.

"This won't do, you know," said Ted to himself furiously. "She is not going to play that game with *me*. I have you under my thumb, my young lady, for *all* your airs. The idea of a girl brought up all her life in a hole like Horton, and never, as her family imagine, meeting a soul, running off on the sly to Paris, and doing the theatres and amusing herself very pleasantly in the society of a young man! Very nice doings, Miss Balmaine, very nice doings," he said to himself, as he glanced at her pale face opposite to him at dinner, a face that

never once raised its eyes to his. "Never out of Horton indeed, never spoken to a man! Still waters run deep. You and I must have a little talk by-and-by."

The opportunity for this "little talk" occurred the very next day, when he discovered her in the drawing-room alone, standing on the hearthrug, with a screen in her hand, and staring into the fire.

"Well, Miss Balmaine," he said cheerfully, approaching. "The world is a wretchedly small place, is it not? Who would think that you and I had met before?"

"I wonder you are not ashamed to allude to it," she said, turning on him indignantly, and towering over him by fully three inches. "I wonder you presume to speak to me."

(Ronald would not have called her chicken-hearted had he seen her now.)

"Presume! indeed—ashamed! I think these expressions fit you the best of the two, since *that's* your tone," said Ted, angrily. "It's a very proper thing for a girl, whom her mother imagines to be buried in the country, as innocent as a dear little pet lamb, and rising and going to bed with the birds, and all that sort of thing, to be met by her step-brother in the vestibule of a Paris theatre, splendidly got up, and in the company of a young lord, and all on the sly—a young lord, who is one of the greatest blackguards in Europe, and who nearly chucks me into kingdom come, and drives off with your innocent ladyship in a snug little brougham. I wonder now who should talk of shame! Eh? I'll tell you what. You will have to be uncommonly civil to me, Miss Rosamond, and make it worth my while, or I'll 'tell mamma,' and let Mrs. Brice know that the lovely rustic daughter, in whose mouth butter would not melt,

has been on the spree to Paris with a young sprig of nobility, and is no better——"

"Stop!" cried Rosamond, her face on fire. "Be silent, sir. He—was—he—is—my—my—husband."

The only reply Mr. Brice vouchsafed to this piece of information was to lay one finger on the side of his nose, and wink in what he considered to be a very knowing manner.

"That's a good one—but it won't go down here, you know. Why, I know that fellow's face as well as I do my own!—he is one of the Falkirk family, either Lord Falkirk, or his brother; a nice wild lot they are, regular young rips—but he showed his good taste, as usual."

"It was *not* Lord Falkirk, or any lord. It was my husband—I repeat to you—my husband, Mr. Ronald Gordon, who has gone out to New Zealand as an Engineer."

"This is better and better. Come. You have it all pat, I see; but, my dear girl, you really must excuse me if I say that I don't believe one word of it. If you are married, why is it a secret? Why did he not stay at home? Anyway, if it was not Falkirk it was his brother, and to that I'll stick."

"We meant to have waited till Ronald came back; but at the last moment we married. I intend to tell my mother.—I am going out to him in ten months."

"Oh, a likely story! You, with all your money, starting off to New Zealand after a two-penny half-penny Engineer. Come, *that* won't do."

"My money!" she echoed. "I have no money, not a shilling!"

"Well, I am sorry to say, Miss Rose—Miss *Wild* Rose

—that the story about the Engineer won't go down with *me.* It's a very fishy business altogether. You will have to be particularly nice and affectionate to yours truly, or, as I have said before, I shall *tell mamma!*"

"Hateful, contemptible little wretch! I loathe the very sight of you," said Rosamond. "Tell what you please. I give you leave to go and inform the world at large at once—I am not afraid of you. Go!"—pointing to the door, and speaking with the courage lent to her, by being in a furious passion for once in her life—"don't stand staring as if you were moon-struck—go, and get it over. Anything is better than sharing a secret with such a creature!"

CHAPTER IX.

LIKE the sword of Damocles, the possibility of Mr. Brice's disclosure hung for a week over Rosamond's head, and then it fell.

She was suddenly summoned one night to Colonel Brice's smoking-room, and there she found him and her mother alone, and evidently in a state of the greatest excitement and agitation. In an instant she had grasped the situation.

"Come in, Rosamond," said her mother, with a livid face, beckoning her towards the middle of the apartment. "Explain at once the *terrible* statement that Ted has made about you to his father. I tell him he must have been mad, or out of his senses," she exclaimed, panting for breath, whilst Colonel Brice foamed up and down the room, with his hands in his pocket, positively like a wild beast in its cage—were wild beasts FAT. "You have lived all your life at Horton, excepting the time you were at school; *no* girl ever led a more innocent or quiet existence, by all accounts—never seeing a soul, from week's end to week's end, but your grandmother and the servants—yet Ted declares that he saw you at a theatre in Paris along with a notorious young *roué*," —gulping as she spoke. "I declare it has made me *quite* ill; though naturally it was only an accidental

likeness. All the same, I have sent for you that you may deny it, as of course you can."

To this harangue Rosamond made no reply. She stood in the middle of the room as pale as ashes, her eyes fastened on her mother's face, with a kind of frightened, fixed stare, her lips refusing to utter a sound.

"Are you *dumb?* Can you not speak?" demanded that lady furiously. "Instead of standing there like a great doll! I—I—you don't mean to *tell* me"—her voice now rising to a scream—"that what he says is true?"

"Of course it is," broke in Colonel Brice, ferociously. "Can't you see it in her face? Speak, this instant," he said, advancing to Rosamond, and holding his clenched fist close up to her, "and tell your mother what devilry you have been up to."

"I—I—am married," faltered Rosamond at last.

"*You* are married!" cried both her elders in a breath, and a vision of a vanishing income of thousands a year presented itself before their eyes, and made their brain to reel.

"And to whom?" inquired Mrs. Brice, breathing hard between her closed teeth.

"To Mr. Gordon, mother. I wrote to you about him. He wrote to you himself. He was obliged to go to New Zealand for two years, and we were married before he left. Mr. Brice did see us in Paris."

Mrs. Brice staggered back a few paces, and collapsed into a grandfather's chair—which was fortunately behind her—evidently in a state of complete mental and physical prostration.

"Where were you married, you abominable, abandoned

girl?" she demanded, as soon as she had recovered her senses.

"Somewhere in London—I don't know where"—in a low voice.

"Somewhere in London! What do you mean? Don't you know the name of the church?—nor where it is?"

"No. It was a foggy day. I could not see anything."

"And where is your marriage certificate?"

"Ronald has it," she answered tremulously.

"And your witnesses?"—in a biting tone.

"I had none but the clerk and the pew-opener."

"So much for a country bringing up! Here's a nice business!" cried Colonel Brice, excitedly. "This young woman, who we all thought lived the life of a nun, runs off without a word, marries some young scamp, has a fling in Paris, and foists herself upon her family as a well-conducted, modest young lady. Oh, ho!"—rubbing his hands, and looking at her derisively—"still waters run deep. It's my own opinion, Mrs. Brice"—turning to his wife—"that the whole thing is a trumped-up story, and that she has never been married at all."

"Oh, Colonel Brice, how dare you say so!" cried Rosamond, scarlet with anger. "How can you be so wicked?"

"*I* wicked! a good joke—truly! Pray, miss, if you *were* married, where is your husband? Where is your certificate? Where are your witnesses? Where is your ring?"

"Here is my ring"—pulling out a chain from the front of her dress, to which a ring was attached.

"I see"—contemptuously; "but that proves nothing. Any one can buy a ring for a sovereign. I'd rather see

your marriage lines, or your husband. *Who* do you say he is?"

"Mr. Ronald Gordon, a Civil Engineer."

"A nice scoundrel to entrap a girl into a clandestine match, a girl under age, and without friends—and then to leave the country!" interpolated Mrs. Brice.

"He wished me to tell. He implored me to tell," said Rosamond, now completely broken down, and sobbing. "He wrote to you from Paris, but I would not let him post the letter. Oh, I wish I had! I wish I had! I am going out to him to New Zealand. I won't be with you long," she added, distractedly.

"New Zealand, indeed! *Jericho* more likely. Don't you believe a word of it, Theresa. She was with Lord Falkirk. Ted swears to it, and he is one of the greatest young scamps in England—it is with *him* we have to deal. He is no more married to her than I am."

"I don't know who you are talking of," said Rosamond, indignantly. "I never heard of the name. I know no such person."

"No, very likely he passed under another name, that's nothing in his line. You remember the awful scandal there was about him in Cashmere, Theresa—he is a wolf in sheep's clothing, and has made a pretty fool of your daughter."

"But I have my husband's letters," urged Rosamond—"letters from Suez and Colombo, that he wrote on his way to Melbourne. You can see them"—pulling out her precious packet, and tendering it with a trembling hand.

"Pooh!"—waving them away—"they prove nothing; they only make the case against him twice as strong. Lord Falkirk started to shoot elephants in Ceylon, just three months ago; he was keeping up the farce a little

longer than usual, that was all! I'll be bound you have not heard from him lately. Eh?"

Rosamond made no reply, but she admitted to herself, with a hideous spasm of misgiving, that she had not. His last letter was posted in Ceylon. She had suddenly grown very pale, and she leaned upon the table, as though she were about to faint.

Could, oh, could what Colonel Brice said be true? Could Ronald, who had sought her among the solitary Marshes of Horton, and wooed, and won her, as a poor man's wife, be really a dissipated young lord, a wolf in sheep's clothing, going about seeking what innocent lambs he might devour? *Could* he? No! it was too frightful to be contemplated. Yet Ronald had an air of distinction that had often struck her. He looked as if he were born in a brighter sphere than that of a hard-working Civil Engineer, and he had large and extravagant ideas, far more becoming to a lord, than a poor man like himself. These recollections flashed through Rosamond's brain with lightning rapidity, and already the poisonous cud of suspicion had begun to operate within her mind. If Ronald was not Ronald, but some other man, married to her under a false name—what was to become of her?

She felt as if the earth was slipping away beneath her feet!

"This is a frightful business, Theresa," said Colonel Brice, now addressing his wife. "What is to be done with this unfortunate young woman? Mind you, she is no more married, in *my* opinion, than that fire shovel. What the deuce are we to do? Thank goodness she is your daughter, not mine;" and he also mentally "thanked goodness," that her yearly income was all fair and square, for if she was not married, it was, as he

expressed it to himself, "all right," and they could hold this escapade over her head, as a mortal explosive. She could never marry any decent man, with such a past as *this*, and they had her right and tight now, for a lifetime.

"Of course, it is shocking—perfectly shocking," groaned his wife, "and we must hush it up, for it is the first disgrace that has fallen on *my* family. It all comes of the Balmaine blood—they were either mad, or bad. Rosamond is *both*. I would rather have found her in her grave, than discover her to be the wicked, deceitful creature she is. As for acknowledging her to be my daughter—I disown her"—addressing herself entirely to her better half, and ignoring the agonized figure in the centre of the room.

"But listen to me for a moment, mother," pleaded the girl, wringing her hands distractedly. "I *am* married, as much married as you are. I am not what you think. I have brought no disgrace on any one, only a great deal of misery on myself. Oh, why did I not take Ronald's advice, and make the marriage public? Why did I not tell Miss Phipps and Mr. Cameron? I thought it was so romantic to be secretly married, and no one to know but ourselves. I was mad, quite mad, and I *would* have my own way, just for once. Why did he listen to me? What possessed me not to have gone to New Zealand in spite of him?"—burying her face in her hands as she spoke.

"It is not so easy, to do things in spite of any member of *that* family," rejoined Colonel Brice, grimly. "And why did *you* listen to him? That is much more to the purpose? As to going with him, he would not have taken you; you would have been decidedly in the way, and you know it well," he added, with a sneer. "What

is the use of all these airs of injured innocence with us? We are not going to be such a pair of idiots as to allow you to throw any more dust in our eyes! It will be a nice business, if this all comes out. As far as *I* can see, the best thing to be done is"—turning to the chimney-piece and coolly selecting a toothpick—"to send her quietly off somewhere, and let us all cool down a bit, Mrs. Brice. Send her, or take her, to the country for a few months. One never knows who may turn up, or what may leak out, or what may happen."

Mrs. Brice considered this reasonable and sound advice. She did not wish her step-daughter to know anything of the family scandal—the dirty linen was to be washed exclusively at home, and in a few days, Rosamond, under the guardianship of Maggs, was despatched back to Horton, to her old quarters at the Manor House (for change of air), which arrangement gave Colonel and Mrs. Brice time to recover from their mental shock, and to weave fresh plans.

In the first place, if the girl's story was true, here were they and their handsome income, entirely at the mercy of this adventurer, who had boldly eloped with the heiress, and who might turn up like the proverbial "bad penny" at any moment. If the story was founded on fact, their best plan was to keep the young couple apart, and to hide the identity of Miss Balmaine to the best of their ability. They decided that she should be kept severely in the background, that all suspicious-looking letters, in a man's handwriting, should be confiscated, and that after the season they would all go abroad.

CHAPTER X.

COLONEL DAVIDSON-BRICE was a wise and far-seeing man in his generation, and Rosamond was just as well at Horton, as things turned out, for after some months of wretched health she gave birth to an infant.

The matter was hushed up by her mother, who, in answer to a telegram, had arrived upon the scene. She was exceedingly alarmed to discover that Rosamond—on whom all their thousands a year depended—was only clinging to life by the slenderest thread, that for days she wavered between two worlds—life and death. She was nursed assiduously by Maggs, and attended by a strange doctor from five miles beyond the Marshes, who was admitted mysteriously into the premises by the garden back gate; and no one in Horton knew that Miss Balmaine was among them (it being supposed she had left months previously), much less that she was all but dying!

A quiet, monotonous life *has* its advantages; not a soul in the place—seeing the respectable Maggs and the old cook abroad in the village—ever dreamt that there were other tenants at the Manor House—tenants in madam's rooms, upon the second story!

The new arrival, the baby, was soon sent forth into the world. It was a boy, a fine healthy child, whom Maggs carried to a poor, decent woman who had just lost her

infant, telling her that "it was the orphan of a niece of her own," and farmed it out at the rate of a five-pound note deposit and five shillings a week until further notice—whilst Rosamond wept bitterly for her baby, her mother having assured her that it had died directly after its birth, and, moreover, that such grief was both disgusting and sinful; and that she ought to be thankful that it was gone, instead of surviving to be a living disgrace to her to the end of her days.

Not a word, not a letter from Ronald for many, many months, and hope and confidence died a lingering, painful death in Rosamond's bosom. She had now given way to despair, and to a firm belief that the man who had married her on that foggy November morning, was not Ronald Gordon, but the wolf in sheep's clothing, as Colonel Brice had predicted; and what had life now to offer her? Nothing.

Assuredly it was from no wish of her own that she was still in the land of the living. How much better it would be for her—and for every one connected with her—if she were buried under a green mound in the churchyard beside her grandmother. She was no fit associate for other girls, she told herself; she had nothing to look forward to. Her baby was dead—and over this "providential fact," to quote Mrs. Brice, she wept and wept, and refused to be comforted. She insisted on seeing its grave with an obstinacy which there was no withstanding; and after a few weeks, when she was able to walk feebly from room to room, Maggs, by reason of her importunity, led her to the churchyard by stealth, and pointing out a tiny mound in an obscure corner, said "Well, there it is for you"—excusing herself to her conscience for the unmitigated lie she was telling, by

saying "that it was a lie of expediency, and that there would be no peace with the girl until she had seen her baby's grave" (as she thought); and Rosamond knelt down, despite Maggs' angry expostulations, and kissed the grass on the little green hillock (which covered the remains of the blacksmith's infant—dead at least six months), and many, many of her tears dripped down upon the senseless earth. Having visited this little shrine, she felt better and more composed, and consented to be taken away from Horton in as mysterious a manner as her mother pleased. She hoped to have died there, but she must take up her load and start out into the world afresh—and she faced the world under better prospects than most, had she but recognized the fact. She knew she was rich now, for she had been present at the tardy reading of her grandmother's will, and had learnt, to her unbounded surprise, that she, and not her mother, was the heiress to the Balmaine money and estates—not that it mattered *now*, she told herself. What was money? What was anything? She had nothing to look forward to but a life without any aim, without any hope, a long drawn-out future, as blank and monotonous as her own Horton Marshes. After a short residence in London, Rosamond, with other members of the family, was deported to Italy—to Florence for the winter; but before her departure she gained one piece of information from the agents of the P. and O. Company. Mr. Gordon, passenger by the *Oriental*, had duly landed at Melbourne, not Colombo; beyond this they could not afford her any intelligence. This news raised a little flickering hope in her heart—the last blaze before it went out in utter black despair.

Rosamond had been absent from Queen's Gate for many months, and although nothing was actually *said*, both Mr. and Miss Brice had their own ideas on the subject of the prodigal daughter, and received her coolly, and with anything but open arms, and she had to submit to be snubbed and patronized as much as ever these young people—who were living on her money—thought good. A new and brilliant idea had dawned on Colonel Brice: it was this—at the end of his and his wife's lease of Rosamond's fortune (so to speak), it would suit all parties remarkably well if she were to marry Ted, and thus the money would be kept in the family! Ted had no profession; but what profession is so easy and lucrative as a rich wife?

Any suitors who might come forward in the mean time must be promptly warned off!

Rosamond was naturally silent and depressed, and lived as much to herself as possible in this uncongenial atmosphere. She was taller, paler, more self-possessed than formerly, and about twice as pretty. Troubles of many kinds—watching, waiting, hoping, despairing—had given a new and more idealized expression to her formerly lovely, but, nevertheless, childish face. Now, wherever she went, whether travelling by rail, walking in the public gardens, or driving along the Corso at Florence, she excited a certain amount of attention. "She was so dreadfully remarkable-looking," to quote her mother; and that lady did not encourage her in any way, to accompany her to balls, concerts, theatres, or other places of public resort; she had no desire to get *her* married, and she was straining every nerve to "settle Lizzie," as she termed it. Rosamond was only too thankful to be left in peace and retirement, little

knowing the real reason of her seclusion, or that half the people in the place were asking one another, anxiously—

"Why the beautiful Miss Balmaine did not go into society? Was it a love affair that was preying on her mind? Was she mad? Did she take chloral, or what?"

CHAPTER XI.

AND now we must visit the Antipodes, and endeavour to discover what has become of Ronald Gordon, and how it was, that, after his arrival in Melbourne, he had seemed to drop out of existence, and had never sent Rosamond one line!

Surely, had he known of the agonizing suspense she endured every mail day; of how her heart throbbed in response to the postman's knock; of her breathless expectation when letters were handed about; of her sickening despair when none came to her half outstretched hand; of the nights she paced her room in tears; of her desperate struggles between hope and despondency, love and hate, suspicion and confidence,—he would have written. He would have written as often as even *she* expected; but that he and forty-one of the crew and passengers of the tramp steamer *Carmina*, bound from Melbourne to New Zealand, were cast away on one of the bleak, barren islands of the group known by the name of "The Twelve Apostles," in the following manner:—When Ronald Gordon arrived in Melbourne, he discovered that a steamer was starting for Auckland the very same afternoon—no time to be lost! He, therefore, removed his luggage straight on board without an hour's delay, as he said to himself, "The sooner he set to work, the sooner his work would be done, and

the sooner he would have sufficient money saved to pay for Rosamond's passage out, and to make her a home." He had not even time to write to her; but his diary of the voyage he gave to a smart-looking lad to stamp and post, with a couple of shillings for his trouble, and the smart-looking lad (despite his protestations) annexed the stamp money, as well as the shillings, and flung the packet—where it would tell no tales—into the fire.

The *Carmina* was a well-known local steamer, trading between Melbourne and Auckland; and she steamed out of harbour at sunset on the very day of our hero's arrival. For the first twenty-four hours the sea was like oil. The *Carmina* throbbed along at the rate of twelve knots, and the deck was as level as a billiard-table. But this enjoyable state of affairs was not to last—it was merely the proverbial calm before the storm. A gale, travelling in their direction, overtook them, and they experienced terrific weather, were blown out of their course, and had two boats carried away the first day. During the night the steering-gear was smashed, and the man at the helm washed overboard. The hatches were, of course, battened down on the agonized, terrified passengers, as sea after sea thundered over the deck and swept away the binnacle, part of the bridge, the hencoops, and a lifeboat. For three days were these miserable people herded together in semi-darkness, expecting every hour would be their last; and whenever a heavier sea than usual struck the ship, a despairing scream burst from some of the women; and the *Carmina* groaned and shivered, and seemed to share their fears.

Three days the storm had raged, three days the sky

had been inky black, the waves mountains high, the wind a tempest, shrieking so loudly as to drown almost every sound in the saloon and adjoining cabins. The passengers were nearly frantic—the womenkind especially; and one of them had over and over again exclaimed to Ronald that "if it would only come, and be *over*," meaning death, "it would be a mercy to them all; but this suspense was like twenty deaths," to which he replied, with all the cheerfulness he could assume, "That many a steamer had ridden out as fierce a gale; that, in his opinion, the wind was going down, and the sea not nearly as high as it was an hour ago." But his consolations were of but little use; the girl, who was sitting on the floor beside one of the settees, merely buried her head in its cushions and moaned for all reply. She and her sister (who was considerably older than herself) were on their way to join a married brother at Wellington, New Zealand. Their name was Bevan, and this one, Annie, despite her pallid, livid face, streaming black hair, and careless, tumbled dress, was a handsome young woman of about five and twenty; her sister, who was fully ten years her senior, staid, stony-faced, and sandy, was the beau-ideal of a stewardess; active and decided in her ways, with nerves of iron, she went about endeavouring to raise the flagging hopes of all the other women—her sister included—with emphatic assurances, and jorums of brandy and water.

Ronald had been right when he said the wind and the seas were going down; they abated from hour to hour, and left as their substitute a thick sea-fog, which to the innocent passengers seemed a heaven-sent exchange. No more rolling over, over, over, till everything slid from one side of the cabin with a crash; no

more pitching headlong. The hatches were raised, fires lit in the galley, and some cooking carried on. Many of the people sought their berths, and slept the sleep of utter exhaustion and relief. And the *Carmina*, with a broken shaft, stoved-in bulwarks, and the loss of her fore-top-mast, drifted helplessly through the mist—the captain himself not knowing *whither*. The sun had not been seen for days, and he was unable to take an observation. Meanwhile, he set about repairing the steerage-gear, reassuring the passengers, and reorganizing some kind of discipline once more—and regular hours; for during the last three days, time and meal-time had been totally disregarded. What did people, who might be drowned at any moment, want with food?

For several days the sea-fog continued, and nobody (save the captain and crew) realized how dangerous was their position. The passengers, finding themselves in calmer weather, were as cheerful as possible, and ate and drank and were merry, whilst the ship drifted along under sail, its fog-horn wailing forlornly, and each hour holding its possible catastrophe.

One night, when the sea was comparatively smooth, Ronald Gordon was not merely awoke, but knocked out of his berth by a violent concussion, followed by a grinding crash. In an instant he realized what had happened—they were aground. He heard the roaring of the breakers, the wild excited shouts of sailors overhead, and in two minutes had flung on his clothes and opened the cabin door. The scene was indescribable. By the light of one dim swinging lamp he saw the other passengers rushing wildly to and fro, and heard the hoarse voice of the captain calling down the companion ladder for "all hands to come on deck." He rushed

back into his cabin once more, seized a pea-jacket, his watch, purse, some papers, and Rosamond's picture, and was about to pull on a pair of sea-boots, when another shock, a frightful lurch, and the shrill screaming of the women, made him return to the saloon. There he found Annie Bevan, paralyzed with terror, collapsed and immovable on the floor, and deaf to her sister's entreaties. Seeing that she was quite crazy with fear, he took her by the arm, raised her, and, snatching up a shawl, wrapped it round her, and half dragged, half carried her on deck. Once there, the most appalling scene met his eyes. By the ship's lights he discovered that they were lying on rocks, with inky blackness all around them; the wildest confusion prevailed everywhere—men shouting, women shrieking, and every one struggling to get near the boats.

"Women first," was the order, and Ronald, with great difficulty, placed the two Bevan sisters in the long boat, which was shoved off full. A shriek near him caused him to turn round, and there was a woman with two children, one in her arms and one clinging to her dress, seemingly distracted. "My Johnny is not here—he has never come up from below; save him, save him, some of you!" she screamed, in a frenzy of terror. "I can't go back again with these."

"Where is he?" demanded Ronald, promptly.

"In the second-class cabin; left side as you go down. I thought he was after me."

Ronald waited to hear no more, but forced a passage with great difficulty among half-maddened people fighting their way up, and discovered the missing boy in a bunk, sound asleep. As he dragged him out there was another awful lurch, and the ship turned right over

on her beam ends, sending Ronald and the child in different directions; but once more he laid hold of him, and made his way on deck. The *Carmina* now lay over on her side, and the sea was making a complete breach across her. To crawl along an almost perpendicular slippery wet deck was a task of no small danger, and encumbered with a struggling, crying child, it was a case of a forlorn hope. However, Ronald achieved it, but only by the coolest intrepidity and most desperate exertions. A girl, who essayed the same perilous passage between the cabin door and the davits, was less fortunate; a tremendous sea broke over just as she was halfway across, there was a piercing cry, the flutter of a woman's dress, ere she disappeared into death and darkness.

Ronald, with the boy now clinging like a limpit round his neck, secured a seat in the small, much-crowded boat—crowded to the very water's edge—and shoved off, as quickly as possible, from the fast-breaking-up *Carmina*.

CHAPTER XII.

ALL night long the shipwrecked people drifted about, merely rowing sufficiently to keep the boat from swamping; for the chief officer (who was with them) felt confident that they were near some land, which they would sight at daybreak. All night long these wretched people, cold to the bone and wet to the skin, cowered closely together and prayed for dawn.

Day dawned at last, and showed them a high, rocky, bleak-looking island, about four miles to the south, and from which they had been drifting all night; now they commenced to row towards it with renewed energy, and discovered that its frowning shores were almost precipitous, but, rowing round, they found an inlet where they could land without much trouble, and beforehand with them, and ready to render assistance, were the crew of the long boat, who appeared to have been on the island for some time, and had already lit a fire from the wreckage.

When all had once more set foot on *terra firma*, and climbed, with many cuts and bruises, to the tableland, they discovered that the survivors numbered forty-two, including six women and one child—the child that Ronald had rescued. The boat in which was his mother, and about a dozen others, had not yet been sighted; the captain, too, was missing. The one great object now

was to get dry at the fire—smoky and sulky as it was, and chiefly composed of wet timber—to have something to eat, and to improvise a temporary shelter for the women, who had huddled together for a little warmth, and endeavoured to shield themselves from the bitter blast with a blanket stretched to windward. A party scrambled down once more to what remained of the *Carmina;* she was going to pieces rapidly, wreckage floated about in all directions, and Ronald wisely recommended his companions to secure all that could possibly be dragged up to the summit of the island, for if a storm came on, every article would be dispersed, and, as far as they could at present judge, they were on an absolutely barren island.

A boat was manned, and various salvage taken in tow—five casks (captured with difficulty), an armchair, a table, spars, rope, and some cabin fittings were among their harvest—and the other and smaller boat, manned by four sailors, followed their example. The whole hours of daylight were devoted to incessant labour, rowing about after floating objects, capturing them, landing them, and dragging them up the cliff; for there was a general (though unspoken) feeling, that in the work of rescue before them was their only hope of escape—from miserable death by starvation. A tent had been rigged up for the women, under the lee of a big rock, and a not unsavoury stew manufactured in an empty oil tin, which had been among the treasure trove. This supper, hastily and thankfully despatched, the chief part of the passengers lay down on the hard rocky ground, with no covering but the sky, keeping as close as possible to the fire, and passed their first night on what was afterwards known as "Crampton's Reef." A

stiff gale came on at daybreak, and by the time the feeble, watery-looking sun had appeared not a trace of the ill-fated *Carmina* remained in sight; her main-mast, which had been a sort of landmark, or rather watermark, had totally disappeared, and all the wreckage had been blown out to sea, also—to the horror of the survivors—both their boats, as they thought carefully secured the previous night; and now they were entirely cut off from all the world, alone on this barren island, and surrounded by a melancholy waste of water. The day was spent very busily—this was not the time to sit down and lament—in the first place, the rock was explored from end to end. It was a hill, starting almost straight out of the sea, three miles long, by a mile across at its widest part; there was, luckily, abundance of water, but the only other thing to be found was quantities of sea-birds, also their nests and eggs, the gannets themselves being so "shockingly" tame that they alighted close to the explorers, and surveyed them with solemn curiosity—never, evidently, having seen a human being in that part of the world before. A few of these confiding and inquisitive birds were knocked on the head, and taken back to be put in the "pot." The next imperative business was to erect a long pole on the highest point of the island, and to tie a blanket to it as a signal to any passing ship. Blankets were rare and precious articles, but this blanket was not grudged, since it might be the means of succouring the whole party. Alas! how many, many weary months did it hang drooping by its staff, or fluttering wildly in the gale—in vain.

The captain had been drowned—washed overboard at an early period, after the ship had struck—and the

second officer had taken his place, or was about to do so, as a kind of leader or governor; but this proceeding was objected to by the sailors, a rough-looking lot, who came forward in a body and declared that "there was no quarter deck on the island, all men were alike *now*, one as good as another. They must share and share the same, and the chap to settle disputes, divide rations, and tell off watches to be kept at the flagstaff, was their chum, "Daddy Longlegs;" and Daddy Longlegs, a long-legged, long-armed, black-bearded man, was duly elected Governor of the island. Then every one set to work to drag up spars and planks, and sails and cordage, and to build themselves some kind of shelter. The carpenter's tool-chest was among the flotsam and jetsam, that, and a cask of rum, a cask of pork, two casks of biscuits, a barrel of damaged flour, a case of wine, several mattresses, found floating, and some small articles, such as seamen's chests, and a few boxes of candles.

The first thing at which all the men laboured was a shed for the six women. This was completed in two days, with a window, door, and chimney; the next building was "a castle," as it was termed, for Daddy Longlegs, and a storage for the provisions, and after this was finished every one was at liberty to build for themselves. Ronald and a young mechanic named Farren agreed to chum together, and knocked up a hut that was at least water-proof, and they had besides the charge of the boy Johnny —at any rate Ronald had—for he refused to go and live with the women in their shanty; he was a delicate-looking little fellow, of about six years old, and Ronald, who was totally unaccustomed to children, was at his wits' end what to do with him. However, love begets love; the child clung to him as he had on the

wreck, and could barely endure him out of his sight. He rigged up a kind of little cot, with planks, and made it comfortable with a mattress of moss and sail-cloth, and he and Farren carved toys, of a rude descripton, which amused their tiny inmate by the hour.

The living was naturally of a very meagre description —salt junk and biscuit, in a small quantity, as many gannets as they pleased, and a modicum of rum, which the two young men exchanged for flour and sugar for the child. Farren was fortunately a born cook, and concocted all kinds of odd, but not unsavoury messes from, as it were, nothing—gannets' eggs, a little salt junk, and a peculiar kind of sea-weed.

They would take it in turn to spend the morning collecting eggs and firewood and killing gannets; in the evening they gathered round their minute fire and enjoyed their only pleasure—a smoke; for a quantity of tobacco had been washed ashore, and was carefully kept, and scrupulously doled out, by Daddy Longlegs himself.

One day was the facsimile of another. Hours dragged like days, and days like weeks, and there was no sign of release—no sign of a sail. To Ronald, this delay was maddening, though he stifled his feelings, and kept his thoughts to himself.

What was the use of burdening another fellow-sufferer with his troubles? he said; every one on Crampton's Reef had enough and to spare of their own; and he endeavoured to be cheery and hopeful with Farren, to tell stories to Johnny, and amuse him by the hour, and to take an active part in every undertaking for the public weal; in fact, he was a favourite with all, from Daddy Longlegs down to his little protégé, and, needless to say, his handsome face went a long way with the

women, who were always pleased to have a visit from "Gordon and the little boy," for Ronald sometimes took him over, to have his clothes mended, thinking, too, that women's voices and faces were good for the wretched castaway child. Of all the women, Annie Bevan was ever the readiest with her needle and thread, had always some story, or some dainty morsel, with which to secure a long visit from Johnny; but it was not Johnny's society she prized so much, as his friend's.

Every Sunday a service was held in Daddy Longlegs' castle, conducted by a missionary, who had been on his way to New Zealand; and every Sunday after prayers Annie Bevan contrived to take a walk round the island, or up to the flagstaff, hand in hand with Johnny—and of course accompanied by Johnny's patron, who began to look forward to these walks, and to appreciate them, more perhaps than Rosamond would have fancied—not that she had the remotest cause for jealousy; it was solely because of *her* that he liked to walk and talk with this young woman. To his starving imagination she had a slight resemblance to Rosamond—in her height and in the turn of her head—a fancied resemblance, which would have seemed preposterous to any one but a forlorn prisoner like himself, far away from humanity's reach, and allowing his mind to dwell hour after hour upon one fixed subject.

Often at night, when all were asleep, when Farren was not merely asleep, but snoring, and Johnny curled up in his cot like a dog, he would go out alone, and pace the island like a madman.

"*What* would Rosamond think all this time? Would she believe him faithless? or dead?"

He would stand with his hand clenched, in a frenzy of

impotence, looking at the stars, which seemed nearer and brighter than our own Northern climes, and telling himself that in another quarter of the globe those very stars were overhead; that selfsame slim young moon was shining down—or would shine on her within a few hours—that was now casting its cold beams upon him; that the same light shone on both, and yet they were thousands of miles apart—and probably separated for ever.

Once he thought he heard a voice, an agonized voice, call—"*Ronald*," but this, his common sense assured him, was only an illusion due to a combination of starvation and imagination; there was nothing to be heard but the sound of the rolling shingle tumbling on the beach, like far-away thunder.

"Would he ever leave the island?" he asked himself frantically, or would he be buried in a nameless grave, on this bleak rock in mid ocean, like the sailor who had died last week, and thus pass out of Rosamond's life, like a dream?

"Why had he been born to end his days like this?" he demanded fiercely of the Southern Cross; "what good to him were brains, youth, and energy? What good the possibility at which his solicitors had once hinted, that a day might come when he, Ronald Gordon, the hard-working Engineer, would be the head of his family?" It was a dim prospect, a mere chance, but still it *was* a chance, a chance he thought of now, with a smile, that bordered on a sneer.

He would barter all he possessed—he might easily do *that*, he said to himself ironically, for now he owned nothing beyond his much patched clothes, his watch, clasp-knife, and pipe—he would give ten years of his

life to see Rosamond for ten minutes, and to tell her of his fate. If thinking, willing, wishing, had availed, he had appeared to her in the spirit, or in her dreams long ere this; but thinking, willing, and above all *wishing*, were dead letters on Crampton's Reef.

No one would recognize the distracted figure of these lonely midnight wanderings, in the cheerful, active, ever busy Ronald of everyday life. He was the mainstay of many, and was painfully conscious of the fact. He started a school, organized "penny readings," manufactured chairs and tables, invented a new lamp, always appeared to see everything from a rosy point of view, and did all in his power to maintain a *rôle*, that he was far from realizing.

CHAPTER XIII.

THEY had now been ten months on the island, and had not seen one sail; and chill despair, like chill winter, was creeping on apace.

Two of the women had died, and been laid in the hollow under the rock beside the sailor, the survivors were what Daddy Longlegs called "tremendously down on their luck," and every one could see that the one with coal black eyes and hair was head over ears in love with young Gordon—that is to say, every one saw it plainly, but young Gordon himself. *He* attributed her eagerness for his society, her excuses for sending for him, when repairs to the hut were required, her invitations to tea —for the women had tea—entirely to her interest in Johnny, who was very weakly and delicate, and often spent whole days in his bunk. On these occasions Annie would volunteer to come to sit beside him, and amuse him by the hour; but, as a rule, most of her time and conversation was devoted to Ronald, who was much occupied in making a kind of rude fishing-tackle and nets as provisions were daily becoming scarcer and scarcer.

The missionary had craftily sounded Ronald on the subject of the youngest Miss Bevan. His veiled inquiries were met by dense stupidity—so he said, and the elder sister at length had spoken to him with a frankness there was no mistaking.

One evening, just after sunset, she came over and paid Ronald a visit, knowing him to be alone.

Johnny was asleep, and Farren was on watch—vain occupation—how many weary hours had weary eyes gazed anxiously from the flagstaff, in hopes of descrying the lights of some passing vessel! Miss Bevan found Ronald endeavouring to make a net, by the feeble light from a lamp, fed with oil from gannets' skins. After some desultory conversation, the visitor led straight up to the topic near her heart, and said, as she crouched over the fire, and spread her large bony hands near the blaze—

"You are very snug here. You and Farren are handier than most; you make seats and cots and shelves; far better off than we are, poor women! I sometimes think we shall be here for life. Isn't it frightful?"

To this suggestion Ronald made no reply, save the reply of silence, which is supposed to give consent, and she proceeded, "One may as well make the best of such life as we have—and make the most of one's time."

"Yes, certainly," returned Ronald with all the spirit he could muster—"never say die, hope for the best; it's a long lane that has no turning."

"You and Annie seem very good friends," continued Miss Bevan; "she owes you her life."

"Very good friends! Of course we are," he assented indifferently.

"Yes; and what I came over to say to you privately was this——" Ronald raised his eyes, and surveyed his visitor critically; something in the tone of her voice startled him a little—"that, that—if you like to marry her, there is nothing to hinder you. You and she can

be married by Mr. Smith, all right and correct, and can live here quite snug. She is a good manager, and will have a little money—two hundred pounds—if she gets out of this; but we may be on the island for twenty years; and, as she says, and I say, what's the good of keeping two loving hearts apart?"

In this straightforward manner did Miss Bevan the elder bring her sister's suitor (as she considered him) to the point. Miss Bevan was not a lady—needless to mention—and was not troubled with any delicate scruples. Ronald Gordon was a smart fellow, and a gentleman, and Annie never left her alone about him, day or night; so this was the result.

Ronald gazed at his visitor for some seconds in blank incredulity. Was the woman joking, or was she out of her senses? No, she appeared to be thoroughly in earnest, and perfectly sane.

"Miss Bevan," he said, gravely surveying her sharp and expectant face, "you are making a mistake. I am not your sister's suitor. I never made love to her in my life——"

"You have, you have," she interrupted passionately, "coming over with the child and walking her out, and making her stools and boxes."

"And what of that? Do you call *that* love-making?" he demanded, with a short, excited laugh. "I call it (and so would any sensible person) a common, ordinary civility, to a fellow unfortunate, cast on this nameless rock, in this deserted ocean. I have gone to your hut by invitation, never otherwise, and I will not deny that I have gone gladly, and thankfully, to hear a woman's voice and to look in a woman's face. Your sister is no more to me—than you are."

This was not the sentiment that Annie had impressed upon her elder.

"To show you how utterly mistaken you are, and how living here, this life of emptiness and horror, you have got strange ideas into your head, I will tell you that I am a married man, and have a wife, God bless her! in England, at this present moment."

"A wife! Married! *You!*" ejaculated Miss Bevan, in a tone of shrill indignation. "Well, I declare! I think you might have said so before!"

"Why? I see no reason for discussing my private affairs or obtruding my history on other people; and surely starving creatures, barely keeping body and soul together, have no time or inclination for thinking of such matters as marrying and giving in marriage."

"I don't believe you have a wife one bit," said his companion, decisively, surveying him, with her chin resting on her hand. "It's all a put-off, and an excuse. You don't look married."

"Well, then, I'll show you her photograph," said Ronald with a smile, endeavouring to make the best of this extremely unpleasant situation. "Here," he continued, drawing forth a locket, "is Mrs. Gordon;" opening it as he spoke, and laying it in her wasted hand, and with an air of such pride and affection that it carried conviction to his companion's stony heart.

She bent down to the fire, and, holding it before the blaze, gazed at it for fully five minutes before she spoke; then exclaimed crossly, and with a kind of sniff—

"Why, she is only a child! She looks about sixteen."

"She is more than that," returned Ronald, with an apologetic smile. "She will be nineteen next week."

"How came she ever to let you away from her?"

"I had to come; it could not be helped," he answered with a sigh.

Miss Bevan, who at first had had visions of dropping the picture into the heart of the flames, was melted by the lovely, guileless young face—a face so young, and yet so sad, it seemed to her; and glancing up, she saw a yet sadder face bent on the fire—the face of this girl's husband, and she herself, who had come, as it were, to curse, went away blessing, in her own fashion, this unfortunate young couple, so young, so handsome,—and separated for life!"

The girl in the picture was a lady, was of a different type to her black-eyed, buxom Annie, and might be a countess by her air; but there was something in her expression that drew her towards her irresistibly—a kind of watching, waiting look. Ay, she *might* watch, and she might wait, for years and years, but it was not likely that she would ever again set eyes on him whom she expected.

Miss Bevan raised herself up at last, and handed back the locket, saying—

"Well, I can't help being sorry for both of you, and that's the truth. I'll tell Annie, and we'll think no more about it. It's not likely you'd have room for another in your mind, beside *her*," pointing to the treasure in his hand. "And now I'll be going; and keep to yourself what I've said."

Over the scene which ensued, when she reached her own cabin and related the episode of the locket to her sister, history must be permitted to drop a kindly veil. For many Sundays Ronald gave the abode of the Miss Bevans, as the sailors remarked, "a wide berth," though he helped as assiduously as ever to kill gannets and to

gather eggs and sea-weed for their benefit, and it was generally believed, by the circle on the island, that the young woman with the black eyes was a bit touched in the top story—wanted some rigging aloft—a perfectly just surmise, and partly the secret of her extraordinary, and persistent infatuation for Ronald Gordon. The winter advanced, and the whole island was covered with snow, many feet deep in some places—and the hardships of the survivors of the *Carmina* were awful. Only for their forethought, in saving junk and biscuits for this contingency, they must inevitably have perished of starvation. There they existed, week after week, on their melancholy rock, the grey sky above, the stormy grey sea around them, scarcely stirring from their dark, smoky little cabins, and crouching over their handful of fire, having barely the energy to keep themselves alive.

Only that the tea and tobacco still held out, they would have wished themselves dead twenty times a day; as it was, there were now several long mounds, side by side, under the rock in the hollow.

CHAPTER XIV.

EIGHTEEN months more had elapsed, and still the wretched survivors of the *Carmina* were living—if living it could be called—on the island, and still watching for a sail. The provisions of every kind had long given out—a few bottles of rum, buried under Daddy Longlegs' castle, and only used in times of illness, were all that remained; gannets were the staple food, and very bad and rancid and fishy they were! But starving people must not be particular, and these birds were all that stood between them and death. Gannets' skins were used for fuel, after the oil had been pressed out of them, and thus they afforded meat, and light, and fire, and were to the castaways what the cow is to the mild Hindoo.

It was feared that ere long even gannets would be scarce, if they did not altogether disappear from a locality that had proved so fatal to thousands of their breed; and if this came to pass, the shipwrecked people would find themselves at last face to face with the grim pursuer, who had been dogging them for so long. One of their number after another he had stolen away; little Johnny, who had lingered through two terrible winters, then died, saying his prayers in Ronald's arms; he was reduced to a mere skeleton, and looked like a shrivelled old man of ninety. His summons was a happy release, but Ronald felt his death acutely.

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All the women had died, except the Bevan sisters, who now had their hut to themselves, and only twenty survived of the original party who had landed on the island, more than two years previously. There had been passing sails; and oh! what hopes had hung upon them, what strained eyes, what agonized wretches, had watched them fading out of sight.

"You see," as Daddy Longlegs explained, "we are blown away here right out of the track of ships, and our only chance is a whaler looking for water, and this bit of rock, with no landing, ain't a likely place. Howsomever, I feel as if we should be found *yet*."

"Yes, our *bones*," returned Miss Bevan, hysterically—Miss Bevan, whom hardships, cold, and privation had altered into an old hag. As to her sister Annie, she was more wild and eccentric every day of her life, and looked more like a mad woman than anything else. Indeed, these terrible years had told on all, including Ronald Gordon, who was one of the toughest and hardiest of the whole party. He was thin to emaciation, weather-beaten, and hopeless-looking; his face wore an expression of settled melancholy, his hair was thickly sprinkled with grey, though he was not yet thirty years of age. Hope deferred had made his heart sick—sick almost to death, and he had almost ceased to wander up and down the rocky path that was called a road—or to gaze at the great wide empty horizon.

Daddy Longlegs' prediction came true at last! A boat's crew, belonging to a whaling ship, came ashore early one morning, in search of water, almost before the inhabitants were astir.

Supposing she had passed them; supposing the sailors had filled their casks and calmly rowed away! But no

—ere they had been ten minutes at the landing-place, they were astonished to see a troop of wild, famished-looking people flocking down to them, with outstretched arms, and cries of delight. In a few moments they had heard the whole story related laconically by Daddy Longlegs, and had ejaculated, and spat out, and blessed their stars and eyes over and over again, had commiserated their unfortunate fellow-creatures; and, rowing back to the ship, had lost no time in landing their captain among the castaways. The ship was a small one, an American whaler, who had had "no luck" so far, and their own provisions were scanty enough. However, the captain would take off *ten*, and they might draw lots, and he would leave them some biscuit and a little salt junk, and tell the first ship he could speak of their whereabouts. He could not say fairer than that.

To this project all thankfully assented, and the great business of drawing lots was promptly arranged and conducted by the captain and Daddy Longlegs. Twenty pieces of paper, of which ten were numbered, were tossed up in a "sou'-wester," and every one took their chance alike.

Miss Bevan drew a number, so did Ronald, but both Daddy Longlegs and Annie Bevan drew blanks; and Annie, with a piercing shriek, cast herself down upon the beach in a frenzy, grovelled in the sand, and beat her head against the stones, and screamed that she would kill herself if they did not take her. But the captain was firm, and could make *no* exception; if he took her, he must take all. Would any one be her substitute—would any one take her place? There was a dead silence, broken only by the lapping of the waves and the grinding of the shingle, as the captain

gazed expectantly round that cadaverous-looking, famine-stricken group. Yes, after a terrible mental struggle, Ronald came forward, and tendered his number for her. He could wait better than she could, he told himself, with decision; she would lose the few senses she had left, if she were obliged to stand on the beach, and watch the boats go off without her. And he took her place with outward fortitude, and saw the whale-boat row away to the ship carrying ten of his companions, including the two Bevans, the younger of whom was laughing and singing hysterically; and in the excitement and flurry of departure, neither of the sisters had said one word of thanks, or even bade him farewell!

Truly in his case, virtue was forced to be its own reward! and as he stood on the highest point of the island, and watched the sails of the whaler becoming smaller and smaller, and gradually fading out of sight, I am not sure that he found it a very satisfactory consolation.

* * * * *

But their relief was coming. In three months' time "Daddy" and Ronald and eight men were taken off the hateful rock in their turn, and brought back, as it were, to the land of the living. They were transferred on board a steamer bound for Singapore, and there eventually landed. Ronald Gordon found himself in the Straits Settlements with a few sovereigns in his pocket, and in rags; and now a fever, the result of exposure and hardships, seized upon his iron frame at last, and kept him in the station hospital at Singapore for more than six months. He was raving and delirious most of the time, and was nearer to leaving his bones in the Straits, than he had ever been in that far-away desolate island.

He raved of Rosamond, of Johnny, of Daddy Longlegs, and of the gannets, and more than once his attendants feared that they had to do with a *bonâ fide* madman. But he recovered, and in due time tottered down to the wharf, and took a steerage passage home in one of the Chinese liners, landing in London Docks nearly four years from the day he had steamed out of Southampton Water, on board the P. & O. *Orient.*

The voyage home had set him up, and he was almost quite restored to health, but completely changed in appearance, as he made a call upon his old employers, and told them his extraordinary tale. They were not aware that he had been one of the passengers in the ill-fated *Carmina;* he had seemed to disappear mysteriously in Melbourne; similar instances had not been unknown. At first they failed to recognize him, Ronald Gordon, in this hollow-eyed, hairy stranger; but soon his intimate knowledge of their affairs, and various plans he referred to, with which he had been concerned, convinced them that this was the very Ronald Gordon they had despatched to the Antipodes some years previously. The *Carmina* was lost, and the insurance had been paid by the underwriters ages ago, and here was one of her passengers come back to life. It was extraordinary! It was like a story—it was positively romantic. The firm were really sincerely glad to see their smart, clever young friend again (though he had not now the smallest claim to be considered either young or smart); they told him so, with much hearty handshaking, and placed fifty pounds to his credit, in order that he might refit his wardrobe, and prepare for a fresh start in life.

But Ronald was to have a start in life of which he

never dreamt, and which seemed to him almost incredible.

When he called and made himself known to his solicitors, they at first, like the firm he had recently visited, failed to recognize him; but after a while his tale brought conviction to their minds, and they hurried him into an inner sanctum, and made him repeat his wonderful adventures once more.

When they had cross-examined him to their hearts' content, the senior partner leant his elbows on the table, and, placing his finger-tips together, said—

"I may call *this* not only extraordinary, but providential! Do you know that we were about to advertise for you, or for the proofs of your death, in all the Colonial papers? Your cousin Robert is dead, leaving no family."

"And my cousin Colin?"

"He was killed in a steamboat explosion in America. And now you, who are of a remote branch, and a younger generation, take the title and property as Lord Airdrie."

"And Lord Falkland—what becomes of him?"

"Oh, he is only related, as you are aware, in the female line," said the solicitor, contemptuously. "His mother and your father were also connected. He is abroad now, leading his usual gay life. I did hear a rumour that he was about to be married; and I hope it is true, and that he will settle down into a steady, domestic character one of these days. He and your lordship used to be considered remarkably alike in appearance, although only distant cousins."

How strange it sounded—"Your Lordship"—thought Ronald; and Rosamond, when he found her, would be Lady Airdrie!

Dame Fortune was going to smile on them, apparently, after all! He could hardly realize this sudden access of prosperity. No more poverty, no more trips to Australia, no more hard work.

He had known that he was in the line of direct succession to this title and estate, but in a remote degree, and never suffered his mind to dwell much on the matter, believing most sincerely that the fact would not affect him in any form.

And now he was a lord, with a certain amount of landed property, and a certain amount of money in the Funds, and, as a natural consequence, a certain amount of friends. But what would it all avail him without Rosamond?

CHAPTER XV.

HAVING established his personal identity, the next thing Ronald set about was to find his wife. Without waiting to have his beard trimmed, or to assume new clothes, he hailed a hansom, and drove off to the last address from which he had received a letter, "402, Queen's Gate." Boldly he rang, and boldly he knocked at the door, which summons was responded to by a spruce young footman, who glanced, with a haughty and supercilious air, at this "queer-looking party," as he mentally termed him, a tall man, in loose, baggy, shapeless clothes (bought a bargain at Singapore), a long beard, long hair, and a soft, uncivilized black felt hat.

Some loafer, of course.

In answer to Ronald's eager queries, he replied in a most distant and disdainful manner, with the door in his hand. "Them Brices had left the 'ouse more than two years ago, and he did not believe they were in London now, but he might look in the directory at his *Club*." This was by way of sarcasm, but it passed unnoticed by Ronald, who anxiously implored the proud footman to make inquiries from his master, and to try and discover when the Brice family had been heard of last. In reply, the master (presuming him to be a dun) sent down a message to say, "That he had bought the lease two years previously, and knew nothing whatever

of the former owners," and Ronald slowly descended the steps, completely discomfited. The next thing to do was to borrow and search a directory, and he studied all the pages of B's with minute attention. They, the Brices, were evidently not in London; he would, therefore, try Horton, and as it was too late to start that evening, he devoted the remainder of the day to a long visit to the barber's, and another to his tailor's. When he left London next afternoon from Victoria, no one would have recognized him for the loafer, and half foreign-looking, hairy man, of the previous day. In the first place, his hair was cropped short, his beard trimmed to a fashionable shape—short and rather pointed (*à la* Walter Raleigh). This beard made a remarkable difference in the appearance, and altered the whole expression of the face to an unusual degree, for his lower jaw and chin were full of a certain character of their own; and Rosamond herself would have been puzzled to recognize him in former days, had he assumed a false beard; but now after four years at the Antipodes, added to this new appendage, his disguise was absolute.

He was strangely altered; all his youth had been killed during that terrible experience on the island, and he might easily pass for a man of seven or eight years his senior; the hair on his temples was grey, his skin was dark and sunburnt, his eyes were sunken, his forehead furrowed, and there was a gravity in his expression that, in itself alone, made a great alteration in the appearance of the once blithe and cheery Ronald Gordon. Ronald Gordon was dead—here was a new man, with a new name!

Truefitt's people viewed the transformation in their client with wonder and amazement. This colonial

looking person had developed into a type that was familiar to them in town—the refined, well-cut features of a member of the upper ten, and Ronald improved himself still further by a visit to Savile Row, and the following day he turned out in a fashionable, well-fitting suit of slight mourning, with top-coat, umbrella, railway rug, portmanteau, all complete, and started, with his mind in a regular whirl, for Horton—intending to take the position by storm, and to introduce himself to Colonel Brice as a shipwrecked passenger, a peer of the realm, and Rosamond's husband.

His fellow captives on the island would never have recognized him in the well-dressed, distinguished-looking man, who took his seat in the express for the nearest station to Horton, and made a transparent pretence of reading a society paper, whilst all the time he was counting the very minutes and the telegraph posts until he should see Rosamond.

As the railway crept along the Marshes, every church spire, farm, and dyke he hailed as old friends. His heart was beating so tremulously, that he could scarcely find voice in which to answer the 'bus-man when he got to his destination.

He lost no time in hurrying at once to the old sleepy hollow,—driving right up to the front gates with all speed. They were locked, they were rusty, and, to all appearance, had not been opened for years! Vainly he shook them—he only got his gloves ruined for his trouble. The house was shut up, the blinds down, the shutters closed—it looked like a tomb, an abode of the dead. It was evident that there was no admittance, business or no business, and Ronald now turned his steps in the direction of the Rectory. "Mr.

Cameron was away, and would not be home for three months," was his vinegar-faced housekeeper's reply to Ronald's query, "and the family at the Manor House had not been there for years."

"Where were they now—could she tell him?" he inquired anxiously.

"'Deed no. It was more than any one could take upon themselves to say. Last *she* heard of them was a year ago, and Miss Rosamond was going to marry some foreigner, and make a grand match. It's washing day, sir, if you'll excuse me," holding the door in her wrinkled, soapy hand, "and Mr. Cameron is not at home."

This was a hint with a vengeance; there was no mistake about her desire for his departure, but still he lingered on the steps, as a drowning man clings to a straw.

"Are you *sure* you heard that Miss Balmaine was going to be married?" he asked, with white lips.

"Quite sure—quite sure," she answered impatiently. "She must be married this year and more. The wonder is she wasn't married long before! Men is that foolish about a pretty face."

And here Mrs. Spring, being herself a hard-featured old maid, was heard to mutter that she had "no time for gossiping," and being no respecter of persons, gentle or simple, went in, and banged the hall door loudly behind her.

"Rosamond married! impossible! He could not believe it," he said to himself in a low voice, as he walked away. It was not the least likely; that old harridan knew no better, and spoke of her still as Miss Balmaine. Evidently their marriage was a secret—yes,

the old cockatrice on the steps little dreamt that she was speaking to Miss Balmaine's husband!

He made his way to the village inn, ordered dinner and a room for the night, and set out to stroll over the Marshes in the interim, and endeavour to compose his mind. He resolved to follow and interview Mr. Cameron and see what he had to say for himself—surely he knew the whereabouts of the Brice family—surely he could put him on the trail? He himself had changed—most things had changed, except Horton. There were apparently the identical people standing in their doorways, the same cocks and hens and dogs promenading the narrow old High Street, the same venerable white horse in the 'bus, and the Marshes were precisely as he had last seen them. He might have fancied he had been absent but one night only, and that his years of hardship, and his terrible experience on Crampton's Reef was but a bad dream—a mere delusion.

Where was Rosamond? That was the vital question. He must and would find her; he could never rest till then. "But four years"—he told himself, as he stood watching a gorgeous crimson sun setting beyond the Marshes and over the sea—"four years without word or sign is a long time to test the constancy of a girl of eighteen, and she, as she had frankly warned him, had 'no will of her own.'" He now recalled what he had then laughed at, with a shudder. Who could tell what her mother might force her to do, and how she might succumb? Still, she could scarcely forget him so soon! Though four years had seemed four centuries to him, probably to her—surrounded with friends and may be lovers—it had passed with inconceivable rapidity. Perhaps she had believed him to be dead, and he was

forgotten as a dead man out of mind. Women were fickle, women were notoriously inconstant, women were incomprehensible.

As he passed through a long shady lane, paved with queer, round cobble stones, *en route* to the inn, he saw a scene that amused him not a little, though a smile was the last thing he would have expected from himself.

It was a ragged-looking, small boy, of three or four years of age, square-shouldered and sturdy, with a fine open forehead, dark hair and dark eyes, defending himself with a broken branch against a dog, a sort of light-brown mongrel, who kept making playful sallies at his little bare legs. The child stood in a corner between a gate pier and a bank, and was thoroughly in earnest, but the dog was in fun, and barked and yelped and tore up the ground with his hind legs, and ran gleeful circles, whilst the boy, with tightly compressed lips, and a look of resolution tempered with fear (but no tears), kept the animal at bay by brandishing the branch in all directions, and shouting courageously.

"What a plucky little chap!" was Ronald's first thought, and "What a pretty boy!" his second.

In spite of his shabby, patched frock, and bare arms and legs, he looked uncommonly well, with his bright eyes, bright cheeks, and curly brown hair.

"Hullo! you, sir!" cried Ronald, "what's the matter?"—pushing the dog aside. "What's all this about, eh?"

"Toddy won't let me go home," replied the child, without the smallest shyness, "and Mother Nan will beat me." Here his lip quivered, and his eyes suddenly filled.

"Never mind Toddy," returned Ronald, firmly; "you come along with me, and I'll take care of you. Toddy is a foolish dog. Where does Mother Nan live?"

"In there," pointing a small brown finger towards the village.

"Is she your mother?" inquired Ronald of the boy, who was trotting along beside him hand in hand, whilst Toddy scampered in front.

"I don't know," rejoined the child, glancing up at him.

There was something in the look and the shape of the little face, turned up to his, that gave Ronald a start.

This was no common village brat, his parents belonged to gentlefolk—some story, some sad, sinful story was probably connected with his birth, and the poor little chap had been "farmed out," as it was called, in hopes, no doubt, that he would not trouble the world for long.

Yes, the more he looked at the little barefooted figure trotting along beside him, the more he was convinced that, for once, he had made a good shot.

"And what were you doing out by yourself?" he asked.

"I came with Poppy Dowle to gather sticks for Mother Nan. If I don't bring sticks she is angry. Look—see!" pushing up one pretty little bare shoulder out of his frock, and thereby displaying several recent red weals across the soft fair skin.

Ronald felt the hot blood fly to his face. He felt that he could thrash Mother Nan with his own hands, but he only said, in quite an every-day tone of voice—

"I hope you are not a bad boy, eh?"

"I don't know; Mother Nan says I am," with an air of frank dejection. "She says I am a little—devil.

Here she is"—now clinging very tightly to Ronald's hand, as a red-faced, weather-beaten woman, in a blue cotton dress and knitted shawl, came suddenly round the corner, exclaiming, "Poppy—Poppy—Tommy! Wherever is that young limb?"

Seeing him under the escort of a gentleman, she changed her tone and air instantly, and exclaimed, with an affectation of good nature—

"Well, to be sure! Don't let him bother you, sir. Come away, Tommy; your supper is ready."

"No trouble at all," replied Ronald. "We struck up an acquaintance in the lane yonder; he was in a difficulty with a dog. What is the little chap's name?"

"Tommy," returned Mother Nan, promptly; and, with a significant nod of her head, "it's about all he has any right to—no father or mother—you understand," she continued impressively, whilst Tommy, still clutching the stranger's hand in his hot brown fingers, stared up in her face with anxious, questioning eyes, as if he was trying to understand what she meant.

"Oh, indeed!" exclaimed Ronald, awkwardly, not knowing what to say. "I'm fond of children. Suppose you let him come and dine with me at the inn? I want some one to keep me company."

"Lawk a mercy me!" cried Mother Nan, in unaffected surprise. "Why, it's gone seven o'clock now, and it's his bedtime; however"—with would-be sprightliness, and with visions of possible half-crowns from this handsome gentleman, who had taken such a queer notion into his head, she added, tolerantly—

"'Tisn't every day, or any day, you are asked to dine at the Merry Sailor, Tommy, is it? I'll just take you home and wash your face and hands—goodness knows

they want it." So saying, she seized upon the reluctant Tommy and hurried him away, and Ronald, being now opposite the inn, walked in, and ordered another place to be laid, with, if procurable, "a high chair, a large bowl of milk, and some sort of pudding."

The young woman in the bar gaped, as well she might, when she heard these extraordinary instructions, and stared still harder when, ten minutes later, she saw a shabby little boy (Mother Nan's brat) seated at table, evidently perfectly at home with the new arrival, and they were talking away, she remarked through the half-open door, as if they had known one another for years, or as if the stranger were the father of a whole brood of children himself, and accustomed to study all their tastes and requirements.

CHAPTER XVI.

RONALD had not had the care of Johnny for eighteen months for nothing, and for Johnny's sake, he had now a leaning towards all children, and something about this bright-faced, forlorn little outcast touched his sympathies in a way that surprised himself. It was a funny sight—so thought the waiter, the landlady and the barmaid, as the two latter peeped into the room, and saw this incongruous pair—the dark, distinguished-looking stranger (apparently some swell), and the little pauper child—in amiable and confidential intercourse.

Tommy had just finished his pudding, and was really incapable of eating any more. Dessert had been placed on the table, and apples and biscuits were set aside for the young gentleman to carry home; and he was gazing in extreme amazement at the cigar his new friend was proceeding to light, never having beheld such an article before.

"Mother Nan has never *that*," pointing with a spoon to the object in question, "but she likes *that*," veering the spoon in the direction of the decanter. "What's your name, gen'man?" he asked after a pause, having no shyness whatever about him; for in consequence of being brought up among his elders, Tommy was a remarkably precocious young person for his age.

"My name," returned his companion, "is Ronald. What do you think of it?"

"Not so nice as Tommy," returned the child, without hesitation. "May I have an apple, Ronald?"

"To eat to-morrow—not now," replied his host, with more prudence than generally characterizes young men. "You shall have them all. We will put them up in a bag presently. I am afraid you must be going soon. You look sleepy. Johnny Nod is coming."

"I don't want to go, Ronald. I want to stay with you," returned Tommy, puckering up his face, and drawing down the corners of his mouth. "I don't want to go back to Mother Nan; I like you best," now hurriedly descending from his perch, and burrowing his head into Ronald's arm. "Do let me stay with you," beginning to sob, and raising a pair of brown eyes, drowned in tears, to his host's disconcerted face.

He had brought a nice old man of the sea on his shoulder, he acknowledged to himself, frankly. What was he to do with this child, who clung to him passionately, and implored to be allowed to stay with him, in broken sobs?

The entrance of Mother Nan, with a single imperative knock, settled the matter—Mother Nan in a large black poke bonnet, and with authority in her voice—

"Time for bed, Tommy! Sorry to send him to you, sir, so awfully shabby and poorly dressed, but one pound a month don't leave much to spare for clothes, when a child has a terrible appetite."

Here was a broad hint, and Ronald instinctively put his hand to his waistcoat pocket, which Mother Nan perceiving, she continued volubly—

"In truth, dear gentleman, I'm a kind-hearted, silly

sort of body, as all the neighbours say, and any one but *me* would have sent him to the union long ago. What's twelve pounds a year for the board and lodging and clothes of a big boy like that, and milk at fourpence a quart? I never afford it for myself" (no, for she preferred gin). "It's just because of the mother's heart in me, and for charity I do it, and it's a hard battle betimes. If the child was honest born——"

"Never mind that," said Ronald, angrily. "That is not his fault."

"No; and any one can see with half an eye that he comes of gentle folk, by the look of him."

Ronald was not disposed to discuss Tommy's parentage with this loud-voiced, fiery-eyed virago, who literally reeked of gin, and turning the subject adroitly, asked "how long she had had the charge of him?"

"Nigh two years," she told him; "he had been passed on to her by a coastguard's wife who was going to America; and there he was," snapping her fingers; "and the payment very irregular, sometimes months and not a shilling—it was a crying scandal."

During this colloquy Tommy had fallen fast asleep, with his head against Ronald's knee, his hand in his, and now Mother Nan made a swoop upon him, and gathered him up in her arms, and pocketing a large bonus from Ronald, with a promise of allowing the child to come round next morning, she bounced triumphantly out of the room.

When she had passed the window, Ronald rose and strolled along the great stone-paved entrance hall, to the inn door. It was a lovely, soft summer's evening, and he stood, with his hands in his pockets, surveying the irregular old street, the church at the turn of the same

(where he had seen Rosamond for the second time), and the rooks overhead lazily flapping their way home.

It was rarely Mrs. Bassett of the Merry Sailor had a customer like Lord Airdrie. Her inmates were mostly commercial travellers, and even these were not too abundant; but the bar drove a roaring local trade, which paid well.

Her woman's curiosity was excited by this good-looking stranger, who seemed to have dropped from the clouds, and who had taken the queer fancy of bringing Nan's Tommy home to dinner. She resolved to have a bit of a chat with him; times were dull, and an outsider from beyond the Marsh was a pure God-send. So, with a little preliminary cough, and a complacent stroking down of her black satin apron, she approached the gentleman on the steps, and tendered the obvious fact, "that it was a fine evening."

"Come out for a gossip," said Ronald to himself, suddenly wheeling round; "and I am her man, but I must be careful."

"Lovely evening," he returned politely. "What a queer old place you have here!" pointing up and down the street with the end of his cigar.

"Yes, very old and uncommon out-of-the-way, but healthy—people here live to a terrible age."

"Uncommon out-of-the-way, as you say," he assented. "I suppose living here is something like a slug's existence in a head of cabbage."

"Head of cabbage!" retorted Mrs. Bassett, much nettled. "Well, I'd rather live here than in London, by a good bit. I was only there once, and the noise just deafened me. I was always losing my way, and only for the

police I'd have been killed at every crossing! Give *me* Horton!"

"Yes, there is no fear of being killed at the crossings *here*. I suppose you have no event of any kind from year's end to year's end?"

"Oh, dear me, yes. We have our events as well as other people. There is many a strange story about Horton, I can assure you."

"You have no gentry in the neighbourhood, I suppose?" was his crafty question.

"We've only Mr. Cameron, the rector now. Poor dear man, he has quite lost his mind and his memory."

"You don't say so?" ejaculated Ronald, incredulously. "I came down here in hopes of seeing him. I am extremely sorry to hear this."

"It was all the fern-gathering and fern-rooting mania that turned his poor brain, in *my* opinion," said Mrs. Bassett, decisively. "He caught his death of cold wading in a ditch, and has never been the same man since. He is away for a bit now, and we have a curate, a rare preacher; it's not much sleep they get at sermon-time now—he shouts that loud."

"And are there no families in the vicinity? or have they all gone away too?" continued her listener, artfully.

"There were the Balmaines of the Manor—a splendid old family," rejoined Mrs. Bassett, now, as it were, warming up to gossiping-point, and, clearing her throat, and squaring her elbows, she prepared to enjoy the pleasure of telling a good story.

CHAPTER XVII.

"THE old lady, Madam Balmaine, were a rare queer one, and no mistake, living in the same rooms year after year, and never stirring out, and *she* as well and as hale as I am! She was as mad as a March hare."

"Yes, go on," said Ronald, removing his cigar; "tell me about these people. I like to hear the history of a good old family."

"Well, madam had a sweetly pretty granddaughter. They called her the Rose of Horton, and with good reason too. You never in your life saw any one so beautiful." (Ronald warmly agreed with Mrs. Bassett in his own mind.) "Ay, but she had a weary, weary life of it! No company and naught to do, and nothing to fill her time, but wandering about the Marshes all alone. I need not tell you, that she got into rare mischief," nodding her head, and then closing her eyes at the mere recollection.

"Eh! what?" stammered Ronald, dropping his cigar on the gravel at his feet. "What do you mean?"

"I'll tell you by-and-by," said Mrs. Bassett, complacently,—knowing she had a good story to relate, and resolved to take her time about the telling.

"The old lady died, and Miss Rosamond—that was her name—lived on at the Manor alone till her people came from India."

"Yes, yes," acquiesced Ronald, who was literally boiling over with impatience. "What then?"

"Before they came back, ay, and before old madam died, there had been talk of a young man being seen about——"

"Oh, indeed!—a young man?"

"Yes. No one knew exactly who he was—but they say he wasn't a gentleman."

"No?"

"However that may be, he and Miss Rosamond were keeping company on the sly—so I've been told. I never saw him myself, mind you." (Little did the good woman imagine, as she turned to impress this on Ronald, that her eyes were resting on *him* at that very moment.) "It's growing a bit chilly now," she proceeded; "and if you would not mind coming inside, I'll tell you the story of Miss Rosamond Balmaine, if you care to hear it." Mind! Care to hear it! Miss Balmaine's husband could scarcely control his voice to accept the invitation, as he threw away his cigar, and followed his hostess indoors. She ushered her companion into a long low-panelled room, with great oak beams, dark horsehair furniture, and a case of large stuffed sea-birds for its most conspicuous ornament. "I am afraid of the rheumatics," she announced, as she seated herself in a roomy horsehair chair. "This Horton is a dampish place, and I do get 'em bad; ay, that I do!"

"And about this young lady?" said Ronald, hitching himself into a deep window-seat, and devouring his companion with his eyes, whilst his heart beat so fast and so loud, that he seemed to hear nothing else.

"Oh, well, then indeed, it's not a very nice story, and I would not be telling it to a young man like you, only

you are a black stranger, and misdoubts that *anything* uncommon happens here at Horton ; and you never saw her, and never will see her—and I'm in a talking humour, as it happens. Of course, I depend on your honour; not a word of what I say is to travel beyond this room—and before going further, might I make so bold as to ask your name?"

Ronald was about to say "Gordon," naturally enough, but he pulled himself up with an effort and said "Airdrie."

"Um—Mr. Airdrie or Captain Airdrie?"

"Lord Airdrie."

"Save us and send us! Who'd expect to see a *lord* down here!" she ejaculated, staring at him with round eyes and parted lips, and an expression of respectful amazement. Never in her life had Mrs. Bassett spoken to a real live lord, and now that she came to examine him particularly, he quite fulfilled her expectations ; he looked like one.

"Never mind me," he said impatiently ; "go on about the young lady."

"The young lady! Oh, to be sure. Well, old madam died, leaving a mighty queer will ; every one said she was cracked, but Miss Rosamond got every penny of the Balmaine property, nigh six thousand a year."

"Six thousand a year!" echoed the gentleman in the window, in a tone of profound astonishment.

"Ay, she was a rare old miser, and wore the same gown for the last ten years. There was never no pickings in *her* kitchen—bones and bottles all sold. But Miss Rosamond can't touch her fortune till she is twenty-five, or she marries."

"Yes." He felt he would like to shake this stolid old story-teller.

"Well, her mother came home from India, and carried her off, money and all, and there she is, now living somewhere like a princess, with crowds of gentlemen courting her, and as many offers as there are days in the week, but not married for all that, at which every one wonders, and don't guess the reason, but" (very triumphantly) "*I* do! Would you like to hear it?"

A nod of the head was all that Ronald could offer in the shape of an answer, and Mrs. Bassett, thus encouraged, proceeded with complacent volubility.

"That little chap you picked up and brought home is a fine, pretty boy, ain't he? Well, and you had him to dinner, and got a good look at him; and now I am going to tell you something that will surprise you—only me and Mr. Cameron's housekeeper and one or two others knows it—that beggar brat, with the bare legs and brown eyes, is Miss Balmaine's son."

Mrs. Bassett drew back her head, as if to survey the full effect of this announcement, and it surpassed her most sanguine expectations.

The young lord gave such a violent start, that he dashed his elbow clean through a pane of glass, which fell in shivers out into the street, as in a strange, imperious tone he exclaimed—

"What—what the deuce do you mean?"

"I just mean what I say, and no more and no less," returned Mrs. Bassett, doggedly. "Tommy, at Mother Nan's, is Miss Balmaine's child, though, of course, you'll keep it dark."

"Miss Balmaine's child!" murmured her husband, wiping his forehead as he spoke, and looking extremely

pale; but as he sat with his back to the light, his sudden agitation was lost on Mrs. Bassett. "How do you make that out?"

"Very easily. After the Brices came home, Miss Rosamond and old Maggs came down here just on the quiet for several months. I used to see Miss Rosamond often, walking on the Marshes all alone, but only in the distance. She never came to church, or into the village—it was queer—she saw no one—and one day a man—a neighbour of mine—came upon her quite sudden on a bridge—you would not know where it is, but it's a long way off—and she was crying and carrying on like anything, and talking to herself, and wringing her hands, and in desperate grief about something."

"Yes, and then—what next?" he asked with feverish anxiety.

"Why, the next thing was, she was given out to have gone away, but it was all a hoax; she and Maggs—we knew afterwards—were then shut up in the old lady's rooms, and it came out later, through a strange Doctor's servant, that his master had attended a young lady here in Horton Manor, and that she nearly died in giving birth to a child, a fine healthy boy; and it was a queer thing, that just about that time Maggs came down with a baby in her arms, and a grand cock-and-a-bull story about her niece's orphan, and offering to pay five pounds money down, and 'five shillings a week, and give a good outfit of clothes to any decent married woman as would adopt it—"complete surrender," as they call it.' *I* knew it was Miss Balmaine's baby—not that it takes a bit after her, or any of the family."

"And pray, how did you know?"

"Well, sir, to be quite open and plain with you

Maggs and I were always friends, being old school-fellows; and she said it was more than flesh and blood could stand, to keep the secret—and just before she left she told me it was Miss Rosamond's child."

A long pause followed this announcement, and for some minutes Ronald did not speak.

"Rosamond's child!" This little neglected village pariah, that even children might not play with, that had no name, and no mother, was also his child, his heir—heir to an ancient name, and to honours and respect. It took him some time to grasp and realize this fact, and to find steady and coherent speech.

"And does the child's mother ever come to see it?" he asked presently, with his eyes on the ground.

"Come to see it! Bless your innocent heart—no, she never troubles herself about it, one way or another; she just hates the thought of it like poison, I fancy, and wishes it was *dead;* and you can't wonder, nor blame her for that, for it's a living disgrace. What I think bad of is, not her never noticing it, or writing, but her sometimes not paying a penny for months; and she rolling in riches, to grudge the poor little creature a few shillings! It's real downright wicked; and Mother Nan, she *do* drink, and when she's a bit 'on,' she do treat him nohow—only he is a spirited little chap, his heart would be broken long ago. I am often thinking of him. Many a wet evening I see him carrying home sticks, and wishing I could take him myself."

This "wish" was an idea that occurred to her at the moment, and seemed a neat and appropriate ending for her tale.

"Well, Mrs. Bassett, I have been listening to your story with the deepest interest."

"Ay, you have, sir. It is not *often* I get such a listener—that I will say."

"And I suppose you have no clue to the child's mother, and don't know where she lives now—eh?" getting out of the window-seat, and coming forward.

"No more than the cat there on the roof."

"And you don't know anything of the Brices, or where they may be found?"

"No more than the man in the moon; they are always rambling."

"Ah well, I have made up my mind, if you think there will be no objection, to adopt the little boy Tommy."

"Lord a mercy on you, sir! Are you out in your seven wits?" screamed Mrs. Bassett.

"Not a bit of it. I am rich, and can afford to please my fancy. I have taken a fancy to him; and I am sure he will be better off with *me* than with Mother Nan."

"But what will a young man like you do, dragging a child about with him? It will look uncommon queer," objected Mrs. Bassett, forgetting in her excitement that she was speaking to a lord.

"I don't in the least mind that."

"And you a bachelor!"

"Who told you I was a bachelor?"

"No one. I judged by the look of you."

"Appearances are deceitful, Mrs. Bassett; for once in your life you have made a bad shot. I am a married man."

Mrs. Bassett ejaculated, "Lawk a mercy!" and cast up her hands in amazement.

"I am sure I don't know why you should be so

astonished," he returned impatiently. "I am not over young to marry, am I?"

"No, no; but I'm surprised, somehow. "Is the lady living?"

"Yes."

"Any family?"

"Yes—one." And he gave a sudden hard laugh.

"Boy or girl?"

"Boy."

"Oh, then it's just a kind of a companion you'll be wanting one child has a lonely time of it. Well, it's a grand chance for poor Tommy; it was a good wind blew you across his path. He is a well-dispositioned child, and truthful—where he got it, I don't know; and, you see, as I tell you, he has gentle blood in his veins. I make no doubt but that he and your own little boy will get on together, and be great friends."

Ronald, who made no doubt on the subject either, agreed with Mrs. Bassett entirely, and, with some trivial remark about the lateness of the hour, bade her good night, and left the old lady to her reflections and her supper.

He did not go upstairs, nor into the coffee-room; he went out and walked—he did not quite know whither; his mind was in a whirl. He felt in a kind of fever, and nothing but the cool sea air blowing over the Marshes could moderate his temperature, as, with his hat off, he walked along wrapt in very novel thoughts.

He was a father—father of a son of nearly four years old! This idea took some time to digest. He could see that the child resembled him and his people. Mrs. Bassett was right; he had not a trace of Rosamond.

"He was a splendid little fellow, and his heart had

somehow warmed to him from the first, and he was certainly a rich prize, well repaying a visit to Horton. He had come to search for his wife, and fate had given him a son!

And Rosamond, who had disowned, cast off, and neglected their child, what was he to think of her? His wrath was hot against her; he was filled with indignation, disappointment, and outraged love. If she had cared for him, she would never have deserted their helpless infant; and though she was an heiress of thousands she grudged a few shillings to support poor Tommy!

Facts looked black, very black, if she had even come to see the child occasionally, but to ignore his existence entirely, and leave him, so to speak, in the gutter, was abominable, wicked, and inhuman; she was not a woman, she was a monster.

How changed she must be! Four years and a half were a long time to a girl of her age; the innocent and lovely young creature, who lived a life of nun-like retirement, and gladly ran away with the first young man she saw, who had concluded a thoughtless, eventless childhood by so serious a step, was now a beautiful heiress, with thousands per annum, an enlarged horizon, and many suitors at her feet, only too anxious to forget the childish cares, interests, and joys which had surrounded her former life; only too anxious to forget the episode of her early girlhood and her long-lost husband; and this he could allow for—yes, he could, and might forgive—but to forget and neglect her first-born, that he would pardon—*never*. He would take Tommy home, introduce him as his son and heir—who his mother was, or where she was, was nobody's concern—was it not, my good sir?—but his own. He would

make an entirely fresh start in life as Ronald Airdrie, and sink Ronald Gordon among the misty memories of the past. No one knew much about him ; he had never been a society man, and people were sure to think more of Lord Airdrie than his antecedents. He was so much altered in appearance, he told himself, that his own mother would not have recognized him, had she been alive—and were he to meet Rosamond now, she would take him for an utter stranger. It was impossible that in him, the grave, bearded, worn-looking traveller, she would trace the familiar shaven face of her lover, and her long-lost husband, Ronald Gordon—and here again his indignation rose hotly within him—she had never acknowledged their marriage, and had allowed their child to go forth to the world nameless. Of course, it was ridiculous to expect that an heiress, with the world at her feet, as he said to himself with a sneer, would care to blazon forth her *mésalliance* with a poor hard-working engineer. What tale had she told her people? —*what* lie?

"Ay, I have a heavy reckoning against you, when I find you, Miss Balmaine," he said to himself, as he turned once more towards the Merry Sailor; "not so much on my own behalf, as Tommy's."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE amazing information which had been imparted to Lord Airdrie had the effect of driving away sleep; and instead of awaiting a visit from Mrs. Hogben and her charge, he set out at an early hour the following morning, in order to anticipate their call. After some inquiry, he discovered Mrs. Hogben's residence—an old, very old cottage, that appeared to be nearly all roof, for the vast extent of brown thatch sloped down to within a few feet of the ground. Beneath this thatch peered out two or three irregular and dirty little windows. A high brick wall and a plot of "curly" cabbage separated the house from the road. It was flanked on either side by two dismal coal-black buildings, presumably barns; and as her visitor approached to closer quarters, he perceived that Mother Nan added the business of a rag and bottle merchant to her other avocations. On a paling to the left hung the skins of at least a hundred rabbits, and not a few cats. From a string there waved in the breeze the remains of some filthy rags and bits of carpet; whilst the whole of the foreground consisted of a stack of empty black bottles, green bottles, and meat-tins. In answer to his knock and a shrill "Come in," Lord Airdrie found himself inside a large low room, whose red-brick floor and whitewashed walls were begrimed with the dirt of ages;

dark rope-like cobwebs—suggesting gigantic spiders—depended from each corner; and the new-comer gathered a general impression of rags and rabbit skins, and an atmosphere of sour milk and stale beer. It was evidently breakfast time at Mrs. Hogben's. An infant with a pinched white face lay in a wooden cradle, ravenously sucking a crust. Tommy (attired in what looked like the ragged remains of a man's flannel shirt) was sitting among some tattered bed-covering on a low bedstead, toying with a cold potato—his recent repast at the inn had rendered him fastidious—whilst Mother Nan, in a frowsy bed-gown and petticoat, her hair streaming loosely about her shiny red face, sat at a table refreshing herself with beer and bloaters.

"Bless my heart, sir," she exclaimed in a hoarse voice, "what a precious start you 'ave give me! I thought as you were the milk! I owe 'em a bit o' money, and they are not regular in calling. Ay, the folk hereabouts is cruel hard. Why, it ain't more nor nine o'clock. I'm feeling a bit poorly, so I'm sommat late, and having a taste of beer; for I ain't got no appetite. I'm shocking delicate, though you might not think it; and I lose my night's rest over other people's children"—indicating the miserable infant in the cradle.

"It looks very ill," remarked her visitor. "Not your own, you say?"

"Laws, no; it belongs to a young girl in a place in Hastings. She sends me four shillin' a week—all she can spare. It's poor pay, I allow; but it's reg'lar—not like them as left that little limb on my hands"—nodding at Tommy. "I ain't seen the colour of his money this six months; and it's hard to expect a poor working woman to support other folk's base-born brats. Only

for Mr. Cameron's housekeeper giving me an odd few shillings and some cold victuals, I'd have sent him to the union long ago. And as I says to Mrs. Tilbe, says I——"

"Come here to me, Tommy," interrupted her visitor to Tommy, who had clambered down, and came running to him in his extremely ragged night attire. "Have you any idea who this child belongs to?" he asked.

"Well, I have my suspicions; but, ye see, I'm one of them as asks no questions, and don't get told no lies. But, laws me! the devilry of some young ladies turns me pale when I come to think of it." (It would take a good deal to turn Mrs. Hogben pale.)

"Well, Mrs. Hogben, I have taken a fancy to this little boy, and would like to adopt him."

"Lauk a mussy, sir! now *would* ye?"—tossing back her locks, and tucking them behind her ears, as if to hear better.

"Of course I'll make it worth your while."

"Well, but ye see, sir, I'm that much attached to Tommy, seeing I've put him over the whooping-cough and his eye-teeth, that I don't know as how I'd ever bring myself to part with him at any price"—now folding her arms akimbo, and leaning back in her chair.

"Why, I thought you were anxious to send him to the union a few minutes ago."

"Lor' bless you, dear gentleman! That was only my little joke!" and she tossed off the remainder of her beer, wiped her mouth on the back of her hand, and confronted him smilingly.

"I'll give you ten pounds, and take him off your hands—no questions asked."

"Ten pounds!" she echoed with a scream of derision.

"And how am I to know that some grand folk may not be coming and claiming him some day, and givin' me hundreds!"

"I don't think there is any fear of that. Come, then, I'll pay up all arrears, and give you twenty sovereigns."

After some further discussion and a few crocodile's tears on the part of Mother Nan, Ronald secured the custody of his son, and the promise of implicit secrecy, for the consideration of twenty pounds and arrears. He left Mrs. Hogben to invent any tale she pleased for the benefit of the boy's mother, but firmly declined to give his name and address.

Twenty pounds' worth of "Old Tom" was by no means a bad exchange for young Tommy; and after a few more hypocritical lamentations, Mother Nan dressed the child up in his best clothes (such as they were), and started him off—had she but known it—hand in hand with his father. Tommy was subsequently fitted out in a more respectable fashion from the meagre resources of the village shop, Mrs. Bassett herself assisting at his toilet, and lost in amazement over the gentleman's odd fancy and Tommy's wonderful good fortune.

"It was a grand day for Tommy, sir, when you happened to see him and pick him out of the gutter. He just lived on the street, and was getting bad ways and words."

"Yes, I have indulged myself in a fancy, Mrs. Bassett; and now will *you* be so kind as to indulge me in something—will you keep my name to yourself should inquiries be made? I have a reason for this."

"And a right *good* one, too," she exclaimed. "I see you're a real Christian, and don't want your right hand to know what your left hand doeth. I'll keep your

secret, your lordship; but you need not be nervous—no one will ever be coming asking after Tommy. Mother Nan's brats are not the sort of children as is *wanted*."

Before taking leave of Mrs. Bassett and Horton, Ronald went to the post-office, which was at a stationer's, and asked in a nonchalant way, "If they could give him the address of Colonel and Mrs. Brice and Miss Balmaine?"

"No, indeed, sir," replied a little white-faced, black-eyed person, with a neat fringe. "We are wanting Miss Balmaine's address ourselves. She has been abroad this two years. There are letters for her lying here the last three months." And out of a dusty pigeon-hole she produced his own epistles from Singapore. "She never asks to have letters forwarded, or leaves her address."

Ronald took her letters, and turned them over. With what trembling fingers had these been written! with what emotion, with what wet eyes he had penned them! And here they lay—his poor effusions, that had cost him hours of pain and labour and joy—lying in a little post-office, dead letters, never likely to be called for. Miss Balmaine had evidently no interest in her foreign correspondents.

"I think you had better send them to the dead-letter office," he remarked; "they appear rather old"—handing them back as he spoke.

"Yes, sir," answered the girl, who had been watching him with keen interest. "I was just thinking that myself; and I'll send them off to-morrow. I know Miss Balmaine ain't particular about her letters. At one time she used to get a good many—and all in this same handwriting; but I expect she don't want to be bothered with them now."

"I dare say you are right," replied the writer, as he hastily quitted the shop.

Two days later, Tommy and his father were comfortably established at an hotel in London, and a first-rate nurse was engaged by Lord Airdrie, who felt himself uncomfortably out of his element, and inclined to laugh in the woman's face when she discussed wages, beer, washing. For her part, she was quite took aback, as she subsequently expressed it, at being hired and having her character taken up by a single gentleman. However, the salary and situation were well worth her attention, and she accepted the post of Tommy's nurse with alacrity. But where was Tommy's mamma? No one appeared to know, and nothing satisfactory could be elicited from the child himself, who had no recollection of any "mamma" but Mother Nan, whom he frankly described as an ugly, dirty old woman, who drank yellow milk and beat him; and who had unquestionably given him a taste for a stable, salt fish, and strange oaths.

There was something queer about the whole business; but money was money. Lord Airdrie was a nice-spoken gentleman, and fond of children, yet not always poking after her, and fussing about the boy, as a lady might have done.

Miss Tait happened to overhear the following conversation as she stood in a window of the sitting-room, waiting to carry Tommy to his tea. Lord Airdrie, who was writing letters, had evidently entirely forgotten her existence, whilst Tommy sat in a chair with a trumpet in his hand, swinging his legs to and fro in a most independent manner, Tommy (who would recognize him now?) wearing a splendid velvet frock and point-lace collar, cuffs, silk socks, and lovely shoes.

"Ronald, where was I borned?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"'Cos nurse was reading to me—'bout Jesus—was born in a stable. I wish I'd been borned in a stable."

"Why?"

"'Cos of all the animals—oxen and asses and ponies—— Weren't there ponies?"

"No, I think not."

"No ponies in the stable!" (in a tone of deep disappointment)—"not like the one near Mother Nan's? Poppy's father had it. Sometimes I slept there in daytime. He had two ponies. I liked it better than Mother Nan's. Ronald, I wish you'd stay at home and play with me to-night."

"I wish I could. But, I say, old chap, you must not call me Ronald, you know; it won't do. You are to call me father."

"Father! Poppy had a father—a very ugly man. But they said I had no father. I can't call you *that*."

"Oh yes, you can"—turning towards the child. "I am your father, and you are to live with me always now."

"I know I am, and I am very glad. But Poppy had a mother. Have I a mother too? Poppy's mother beat him with a rope, 'cos he broke a bottle. I don't want a mother," he concluded, in a tone of real tragedy.

"Then——" began Ronald. But at this instant he caught sight of a white apron, half concealed by the window curtain, and continued, "Why, here is your nurse waiting all this time. You must go to your tea."

And Miss Tait came forward at once and carried her charge away. Both nurse and boy were exceedingly sorry that the conversation had been so hastily

concluded—nurse especially. As she undressed Tommy, she plied him with not a few artful little questions as to whether he had ever seen or heard of his mamma. Had he not a pretty mamma?

"No; only Mother Nan, and she was not pretty."

"What was she like? Do you remember her?"

"She was cross, and red, and wore no stockings," he answered in a drowsy voice; and in another moment he had dropped asleep, leaving Miss Tait's curiosity more wide awake than ever.

Lord Airdrie had a great deal of legal business to attend to, and remained in London for about six weeks, making daily visits to Lincoln's Inn Fields. His former associates had almost forgotten Ronald Gordon, and he lived a very quiet life at an hotel close to Hyde Park. However, it soon became known that the new Lord Airdrie was a grave, gentlemanly man, a widower with one child. He never alluded to his wife; presumably she had died when the boy was born.

Besides arranging matters respecting his succession to the Airdrie title and estates, Ronald had made careful inquiries about the Brice family, and discovered that they lived half the year abroad, and the other half at Balmaine Court, the old family seat which Madam Balmaine had once upon a time evacuated in favour of her daughter-in-law. Ronald remembered it having been described to him by Rosamond as a brick house with white corner-stones and facings, that looked exactly like a red-faced old squire with white eyebrows and whiskers. It had been let for years, as it was in the centre of a capital hunting country. Apparently the lease had now expired, and Mrs. Brice was once more in possession.

Lord Airdrie was aware that he must make his identity known to Rosamond, and establish their marriage in the sight of all men, and that ere long. He would have claimed her at once but for his discovery at Horton. A girl who could farm out and abandon her child was a person to approach with cautious deliberation. Probably, when she learnt that her long-lost husband had reappeared in a different character, and could now endow her with a fortune and a coronet, she would receive him with open arms. And what would such a welcome be worth? He had announced his marriage and his wife's name to his lawyers; but otherwise he resolved to keep the matter concealed for a time. He would take a place in the neighbourhood of the Court for a few months, and see how the land lay, ere he declared himself as the husband of Miss Balmaine. It was a step to which his sober-minded legal advisers were strongly opposed; it savoured too much of a risky and romantic—not to say awkward—situation; would entail a mystery, and a large outlay of false pretences. Supposing that Lady Airdrie, believing herself to be a widow, became engaged to another man? supposing all manner of complications? But their client was immovable. They were not in enjoyment of his absolute confidence; they had never heard, and never would hear, of how and where he had found his son; and ultimately they were prevailed upon to enter into his views. There were several fine places to be let in the neighbourhood of Balmaine Court, including Queen's Gift, a fine old Elizabethan house, standing in a park of fifteen hundred acres. This was advertised as "To let, furnished, with six thousand acres of excellent shooting." The house had been vacant for years, and to the

amazement of Lord Airdrie's acquaintances, they heard that he had rented a place near Arminster, and turned his back on Scotland, his own estates, expectant tenantry, and Airdrie Castle. He announced that he was not sure as to how the sharp northern climate would agree with his boy. So they went and settled in the south, in order (little as any one guessed it) to be in the neighbourhood of a young lady who was the wife of one and the mother of the other—Miss Balmaine.

CHAPTER XIX.

AND now to return to Miss Balmaine, and observe how she has fared since we saw her four years ago. She is greatly altered; not so much in person as in mind, although the beautiful Miss Balmaine, with her fashionable manners and fashionable clothes, no more resembles the "Rose of Horton" than a sweet wild flower resembles a stiff artificial-looking camellia. In mind Rosamond has become entirely metamorphosed; her early impulses, her early affections, have been nipped in the bud and killed by a cruel frost. She is, to all appearances, as unimpressionable, worldly minded, and heartless, as any young woman between the four seas, and her motto is, "There is nothing new, and nothing true, and it does not signify." Miss Balmaine is lovely, and perfectly alive to the fact; she is also an heiress, and fully appreciates her own value, thanks to the disclosures of her lawyers and trustees. She rarely casts a thought to that blotted leaf in her life—the little grave in the shadow of the church. The memory of Ronald Gordon she would tear from her mind, were it possible. She endeavours to assure herself, that some things were a dream; and when her thoughts touch upon a portion of her past, they recoil from it with horror. She firmly believes that Ronald Gordon married her under a false name—and then deserted her. Sometimes,

as she stands a kind of sovereign among other girls, the thought of what she imagines herself to be makes the blood mount to her temples in an agony of shame. If people only *knew*, she would say to herself with clenched hand; if these men who make love to me and my money, these women who kiss and caress me, had the remotest idea of the living lie—the whited sepulchre I am—what would they do? what would the world say? But the world suspected naught, and said nothing, beyond the common remark that "Miss Balmaine's beauty was spoiled by her hard expression, and that she was immensely supercilious, and difficult to please."

* * * * *

Mrs. Brice, although she had been twice a widow, and had passed eighteen years in the East, looked remarkably young; she was in reality forty-three, but, as already mentioned, easily passed for five and thirty. She had retained her slim figure, her fair skin; her golden hair had been "restored." She was fortunate to have an accomplished French maid; and when she went abroad, after Rosamond's disgrace, she entered upon an Indian summer of youthful enjoyment. She and Lizzie, her step-daughter, spent a merry season at Nice—they gambled and danced and picnicked, and dressed to their hearts' content—whilst Rosamond remained in the background, and was treated as a schoolgirl, and almost entirely ignored. She was allowed to take singing lessons, to subscribe to the library, and to walk abroad (at unfashionable hours) attended by a maid.

Rosamond had got into a dreadful scrape. Of this Miss Brice was of course aware; but she had never gathered any particulars. It was a case of *Cherchez*

l'homme—some disgraceful escapade with a nameless scamp. So much for a country bread-and-butter miss—a miss who seemed only too thankful to efface herself, and hide her diminished head on all occasions. This was a good thing for Miss Brice, who enjoyed, as deputy, the heiress's privileges—such as carriage, maid, and money, and assured all anxious inquirers "that her step-sister was a most peculiar girl, and detested strange faces, and hated society." As for Mrs. Brice, she did not know what to make of her daughter. She believed that she had gone through the form of marriage—that the bridegroom was not Lord Falkland, for he had been staying at the same hotel with them in Switzerland; and she had noted that when he and Rosamond had casually met—in the hall—that they really *were* strangers.

But then who was the other man? Possibly, probably, and providentially, he was dead, and Rosamond's experience would keep her in humble subjection until she was twenty-five; meanwhile her fortune was most acceptable to her relations. She was a queer, self-constrained creature; but sometimes there was a look in her great dark eyes that made her parent momentarily uncomfortable, and her lips wore an expression that reminded Mrs. Brice of the late eccentric Madam Balmaine.

When the Brice family—consisting of Colonel, Mrs., and Miss Brice, and Miss Balmaine—had spent twelve months wandering about the Continent, the latter began to recover her spirits in a small degree. After all, at twenty there is a good deal of elasticity in a girl's disposition! Rosamond made a new departure, to the amazement of her relations, who were disposed to keep

her entirely in the background, whilst they enjoyed the advantages accruing from her large income. As she had been so broken in spirit and health, they never guessed at the kind of character they had to deal with until a battle royal—or, rather, an unexpected sortie—from Rosamond's entrenchments opened their eyes to their widest extent. Colonel, Mrs., and Miss Brice had gone to the grand reception at the British Embassy at Rome, leaving their "Cinderella," as usual, at home. The said "Cinderella," pacing the salon of their hired palace, with her hands locked behind her, staring hard at the dark, star-scattered sky, had got hold of some new ideas. She resolved that she would no longer crawl through existence in sackcloth and ashes, but "live while she lived." She would bury the past, and roll a heavy stone to the door of its sepulchre. To "live" she should go out, and mix in society—dress, drive, dance, spend money. She must no longer be crushed and cowed by her mother and Lizzie—who evidently expected her to weep all the days of her youth for what, after all, was not her fault. The sin—if sin it was—did not lie at her door. Her error had been that she was too yielding—trusting. She had endured much, and waited with the wild torture of waiting, which involves uncertainty and concealment—and Ronald never wrote, and never came! She would never trust to any one again. It seemed to her that, in the words of the Psalmist, she could say, "All Thy waves and billows have gone over me." She had prayed for death, and death itself had flouted her. She had possessed a husband and child, and to think of either was to cover herself with shame. Now she would begin life afresh—enjoy it she might not; but, at least, she would pretend

to do so. Perhaps, in the end, the gay round might become second nature, and bring her forgetfulness.

The next morning, as the three ladies were sitting together, and Lizzie was vehemently descanting on her triumphs, Rosamond remarked—

"You seem to have had a delightful evening."

"Of course I had!" returned Miss Brice, with a cold stare. "I always have a good time!"

"I should like to go out too, mother, in future. Will you please accept invitations for me?"

For a moment there was an impressive, awe-struck silence, and then Mrs. Brice exclaimed sharply—

"Rosamond, I don't think you know what you are talking about!"

"Yes, mother, I do. I am tired of being"—significant pause—"dull. I should like a little change."

"A change!—for a girl of your——" She paused, in her turn, glanced at Lizzie, and added, "inexperience. I think you are remarkably fortunate, girl, surrounded by loving relations and every comfort. What more would you have?"

"I would have balls and theatres, plenty of pretty dresses, and a horse to ride!"

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Lizzie, "what preposterous nonsense! when she can neither ride nor dance nor dress!" And she left the room with a laugh.

Mrs. Brice had no intention of producing her own daughter in society. In the first place, she would be likely to eclipse Lizzie, and destroy her prospects of matrimony; and secondly, she would fix her mother's age at once. As the parent of a tall, grave-eyed young woman of twenty, giddy little pink-cheeked, yellow-haired Mrs. Brice could no longer pose as eight and twenty, dance all night, take the part of "Sweet

Seventeen" in amateur theatricals, and be addressed by her friends as "My dear girl." It was hard on the poor woman, who clung so tenaciously to youth, to have a grown-up daughter who looked two or three and twenty. Mrs. Brice was an admirable burlesque actress, an inimitable dancer, an audacious flirt—accomplishments she had brought to perfection in certain Indian hill-stations. In two or three years' time, when Lizzie was settled, Rosamond might make her *début*. Meanwhile, it was more prudent, more economical, and more agreeable to herself, to keep her daughter at home.

"I am not out of my senses, mother. Why should I not enjoy some of the advantages of being an heiress?"

At this unexpected question Mrs. Brice became scarlet, and then ghastly white.

"What do you mean?" she demanded angrily.

"I mean that if it is true that grandmother left me all her money, I should like to spend some of it. I have only two scudi in my purse, two dresses in my wardrobe; I do not like being poor when I am really rich. I do not care for the *rôle* of 'Cinderella.'"

"Dear me, what grand words! You seem to forget that you are not your own mistress until you are five and twenty. This new whim of yours is absurd. At present your money is mine; you are a minor."

"I am aware of that, and I hate talking about money to you, mother, in this way. Please don't think me mercenary; you are welcome to half of all I have," said Rosamond, in a cool, decided tone; "but if you insist on keeping me in the schoolroom, with sixpence a week for pocket-money, I rebel."

"You—*rebel?*"

"Yes, and I shall appeal to my trustees. I believe

there are trustees. I am not bound to live under your roof, and I can find a home with some one who will see matters from my point of view. You and I do not pretend to care for one another, as mother and child—how could we? We were strangers for eighteen years; we must, I believe, always be strangers; but we need not quarrel, need we? You do not care for me, and you do not know me; you think I am a silly, ignorant country girl. I am not what I once was. I am twenty years of age, and I have been through a school which has taught me much."

During this long speech Mrs. Brice listened with distended eyes and parted lips, and red blotches coming and going on her cheeks and forehead. Was this tall figure standing beside the table easily-led, easily-hoodwinked, docile Rosamond? No. They must temporize; if the girl went and put herself into the hands of her trustees, the yearly income also departed, and that would never do. So she took out her handkerchief and wept over Rosamond's cruel, unfilial heart, finally affected complacency, stifled her feelings, and entered into her emancipated daughter's views without further expostulation or argument. In due time Miss Balmaine burst forth into Roman society like a beautiful young butterfly, and turned the heads of not a few of the Italian nobility. Counts, marquises, and various foreign and impoverished noblemen, laid their coronets, pedigrees, and hearts at Miss Balmaine's feet, only to be politely declined; and the heiress's inaccessibility soon became as much a byword as her wealth and beauty. She took riding lessons, and proved herself a worthy descendant of her fox-hunting grand-dame. She drove and visited and danced, and lived in a perpetual condition of feverish mental and bodily activity.

The Brices spent two years on the Continent, then

returned to Balmaine Court for the summer, but they much preferred foreign lands, and invariably quitted England with the swallows; the warmer rays of the sun, the freer mode of living, suited them better than the grey skies and severer domestic rules of their native country. Miss Brice was married at last—had succeeded in securing for a husband a wealthy, bucolic, near-sighted squire named Crosse, and had taken herself and her handsome trousseau to the north of England. Mrs. Brice had lost no time in replacing her by a niece of her own, called Amy Jebb. She was older than Rosamond, but looked younger, being fair and *petite*, with forget-me-not blue eyes, a *retroussé* nose, and hair like spun silk. She was generally taken for Mrs. Brice's daughter, as she bore a strong resemblance to her aunt, whilst Rosamond was "a Balmaine." Amy was an amusing, shallow, empty-headed little person, who entertained warm and violent fancies, which proved to be mere Saturday to Monday guests, and soon passed out of her mind, and were, fortunately for her, easily forgotten.

She had been in love half a dozen times, yet she was not heart-broken, but quite ready to be in love half a dozen times more; love was a pleasant sensation for the time—a little episode in her life, and no more. Like Ulysses, she was ever roaming with a hungry heart. Now, Rosamond had no love affairs, and secretly in her own person waged war on all mankind. Various admirers she had flirted with, encouraged, and then tossed aside like a withered flower. She was avenging herself on every man she met (who was so unlucky as to be ensnared by her beautiful face) for the wretch who had betrayed her; and wherever she went, as Colonel Brice proudly boasted to a club acquaintance, "she left a track, marked by the slain."

CHAPTER XX.

QUEEN'S GIFT was one of the show places in the county of Sandshire; indeed, of late years it had been more for show than use. It was visited by artists and tourists from afar, and even desecrated by picnics! The park was let to graziers, the shooting to a syndicate of stock-brokers. It was uninhabited, stately, and deserted, save for a few gardeners about the hot-houses, who despatched flowers and fruit to Covent Garden, and an army pensioner in either gate lodge. The mansion was fully furnished, the furniture corresponding to the family portraits by Sir P. Lely, J. Reynolds, Godfrey Kneller, and Vandyke, which hung upon the walls. It was situated within three miles of Balmaine Court, and Colonel Brice, as well as the rest of the neighbourhood, was surprised and delighted to hear that the house and shooting had been rented for a year by a certain Scotch nobleman, whose very name was unfamiliar in their ears.

It was Miss Balmaine's custom to drive over occasionally to Queen's Gift, and there, leaving her pony-cart outside the gate, ramble through the woods, or about the grounds, or over the moss-covered walks in the old walled-in gardens. This silent, deserted spot had a soothing influence upon her highly strung nerves, and possessed a fascination for which she could not

account. She was running the round of pleasure, making the most of her youth, according to the popular notion. Hers was a sensitive, morbidly introspective nature; and dissatisfaction, *ennui*, and weariness of heart attended her closely. She lived in a crowd, but a crowd is not necessarily company. Relations may be strangers, and fellowship but a tinkling cymbal, where there is no love. Rosamond was happiest when she was entirely alone. At home, there was no such thing as solitude: there were guests to entertain, trivial notes and letters to answer, social engagements to fulfil, calls to make and pay; and even in her own sitting-room she was not secure from girl visitors, who "biked" or rode over of a morning, nor from demands upon the purse of Madam's charitable granddaughter, nor from the appeals of her maid to permit her to "try on."

At the highest point in the park at Queen's Gift stood an eccentric-looking pagoda, from whence a fine view was obtainable. It was built upon a plateau, which was reached after a stiff climb through the woods, and was known by the name of "Fleming's Folly." Miss Balmaine was fond of scrambling up to this Folly, leaning her elbows on the balustrades, and surveying the landscape—a flat wooded country, dotted with irregular red farmhouses and church-steeples. This particular evening she had come alone (leaving Amy gathering ferns in the woods, and the pony-cart at the nearest gate), and indulged in a whole hour of solitude, and a multitude of daydreams. Her latest and most vivid daydream was to become an hospital nurse. By all accounts it was hard work—rough work—and involved long hours and harrowing scenes. Still,

anything was better than this social treadmill—Ascot, Goodwood, Cowes, Homburg, the Italian lakes, Riviera, and then back to the Court, to begin the same thing all over again. At present she might be ornamental, but she was of no use to any one in the whole wide world. As a nurse she might be worth her salt, and help to alleviate other people's sufferings. She had an iron nerve and constitution, and had already attended an ambulance class. Of course that was a mere bagatelle! Still it was a beginning. As for Balmaine Court and her money, her mother could have the former for life, and the latter would be acceptable to her hospital. At last the stiffness of her elbows, and the sloping western sun, warned the fair castle-builder that it was time to depart; and with a sigh she replaced her hat, gathered up her skirts, and commenced to descend the steep stairs of the pagoda.

Two people were sitting on the top step of the first landing as she came down, sitting, of course, with their backs to her—a gentleman and a little boy. The child was eagerly watching his companion, who was engaged in cutting something out of wood, apparently a toy.

"Visitors, like myself," she thought, "come to far-famed Queen's Gift."

The sound of her steps was not heard by either of them, they were so busily intent over the work in hand; and then a "frow-frow" of silk petticoats, and a "Would you kindly allow me to pass?" roused the man effectually, and he started up, cap in hand, to make way for a tall young lady—a slight, rather imperious-looking damsel, who was standing directly behind him. He looked a second time, with a sharp quick glance,

and in an instant his bronzed face changed to a faint ashen hue, and the half-completed toy dropped from his hand.

"Are you ill?—is anything the matter?" inquired the young lady, glancing at him with polite curiosity.

"No—nothing," he answered in a strained voice.

Miss Balmaine never knew what impelled her to speak to him again, instead of passing on—this bearded, middle-aged stranger, who looked at her so steadily, and yet there was nothing rude in his gaze.

"It is a charming old place, is it not?"—waving her hand towards the woods. "I advise you to make the very most of your time, for I believe it has been let; and we shall all be shut out. What a dear little boy!" —now noticing Tommy, who was contemplating the beautiful lady with round-eyed astonishment.

Little did he guess that this lovely apparition was his mother; but Ronald, in a second glance, had recognized his wife. True, the girl who had so suddenly descended upon them was dressed in a French summer gown; her hat, covered with nodding roses, was a triumph of millinery; long tan gloves were on her hands; she wore tinkling bangles on her wrists; a pink-flowered sun-shade was tucked under her arm. She looked as if she had stepped out of a fashion-plate. Her hair was several shades darker, her face harder, its outline sharper and more classical than formerly. This was no rustic beauty, but a smart, distinguished-looking young woman of the world, yet all the same Rosamond, his wife! He had come into the neighbourhood on purpose to meet her, and expected to have first seen her at a distance—possibly in church—and to have schooled himself by degrees; but this sudden encounter had upset

all his plans. Miss Balmaine glanced once more at this eccentric tourist, who had scarcely opened his lips, and appeared to be suffering from some inexplicable emotion —could it be shyness? She regarded him with cool speculation. He was a thin, not to say hollow-cheeked, man of about forty years of age; the hair on his temples was streaked with grey, and the lines on his brow were deeply scored; he had a short, dark beard, and a pair of deep-set, dark eyes. She noticed that beads of perspiration were standing on his temples, and that his nostrils were twitching.

"I am quite sure that you are ill!" she exclaimed. "Pray let me——"

"I am *not* ill," he interrupted, rather roughly; "it is nothing—nothing"—passing his handkerchief across his forehead as he spoke. "Do you live near here?"—rousing himself with an obvious effort, and accompanying her down to the foot of the steps, when the boy seized upon the half-finished toy.

"Yes; about three miles off. I enjoy wandering about the woods. I wish the owner had not let the place—above all, to Lord Airdrie."

"Why not to Lord Airdrie?" he inquired, as he strolled down the path beside her.

"Because, when he comes, he will put a stop to strangers marauding about the place. I hear he is a regular recluse, and does not wish to see his fellow-creatures."

"Who, I wonder, has been telling you this?" he asked slowly.

"Oh! Rumour"—with a slight shrug of her shoulders.

"Then Rumour, for once, is wrong. He is not at all averse to society, and will be only too glad to see people

coming and going about the park as usual. I hope you will come as often as you please."

"I—*you*—hope! Do you know the present Lord Airdrie?"

"As far as any one can know one's self."

"Do you mean that you are he?"—with dawning interest.

Her companion bowed, and said, "I must introduce myself, since there is no one else to perform the ceremony."

"And I suppose I must follow your example," said Miss Balmaine, laughing as she spoke; she had a low, sweet laugh. "I am Miss Balmaine. We live over in that direction"—pointing with her parasol—"my mother, Mrs. Brice, and Colonel Brice, my stepfather—an old red-and-white Queen Anne house, called Balmaine Court. Do you know it?"

"No; I am entirely a stranger to this part of the world."

"You must have arrived rather unexpectedly. I go to paint at Queen's Gift occasionally; I had permission to copy that cavalier by Vandyke; and there was no sign of you a week ago. All the furniture was in holland bibs, and the chandeliers in bags."

"I came last night."

"And is this your little boy?"—nodding at Tommy, who was trotting alongside with his toy clutched in his grasp.

"Ye-es," he answered very stiffly.

"He is a dear little person. The path is rather steep. Don't you think you ought to carry him?"

"Oh, he is all right."

"And when may we hope to see Lady Airdrie? Is she here?"

This was an embarrassing question, and for a whole minute Lord Airdrie could not think of any appropriate reply. Then Miss Balmaine herself came to the rescue, saying, "I don't mean the Dowager. I mean your wife —your little boy's mother."

"Yes, I quite understand," he answered coldly. "He has never known a mother." As he spoke a dark flush flamed into his face.

"No! Poor darling! How sad! I think there is nothing more forlorn than a motherless child."

To this observation her companion made no answer, and the pair walked down the uneven path in dead silence, she thinking: "Evidently his wife is a painful subject. What a splendid *parti* he will be for some girl in the neighbourhood—this interesting, taciturn widower!" He was saying to himself, "Abominable hypocrite! hateful, double-faced, heartless, *fin-de-siècle* monster! that goes into raptures over a stranger, and grudges your own child five shillings a week!"

Their reflections were brought to an abrupt conclusion by Master Tommy, who suddenly caught his tiny foot in a root, with which the path was interlaced, and fell headlong. He was picked up promptly—with a slight cut upon his temple, and another on his knee—and, seeing blood, instantly broke out into a loud scream.

"Come, come!" said his father; "it's not very bad, and *it's* only girls that cry. Be a man, Tommy."

Tommy looked up piteously at his father's face, and considered the sentiment with streaming eyes. It was all very well to say, "Be a man," but he was not yet four years old. He made a noble struggle, although there was something warm trickling into his eye, and his knee was giving him sharp twinges. He read sweet

sympathy and consolation in the pretty lady's face. She took him from the man's arms (at three and a half a child turns instinctively to a woman).

"Never mind, darling," she said, taking him into her lap, and sitting down on a log, whilst his father looked on helpless. "It will be all right,"—and she stanched the cut with his handkerchief, and kissed his cheek—"see, I will kiss it to cure it." Then she dived into her pocket and produced a *bonbonnière*, and said, "Open your mouth, and shut your eyes, and see what I will send you."

As Tommy, appeased and assured that he was a brave boy, munched chocolate, she addressed herself to his knee, and discovered a rather deep cut; this she bound up with his father's handkerchief, saying, as the child whimpered a little—

"Never mind, Tommy; never mind, dear, it will be well before you are twice married—only"—looking up at his anxious parent with an expressive smile—"if he is wise, he will never marry at all."

"No! Miss Balmaine has a bad opinion of the married state."

Yes," she assented, with a nod; "give me single blessedness!"

"Rather early days to have arrived at such a conclusion."

"I arrived at that conclusion long ago," she answered; and then, for some inexplicable reason, she blushed scarlet. "I think Tommy is fit to travel," she said, rising, "and you had better carry him; my cart and pony are not far from here, and you can drive him home."

"I should not think of depriving you of your trap,

and I can easily carry him." As he spoke a turn had brought into view a smart Ralli car and cob, with a groom standing at his head, whilst a pretty girl, in a pink cotton gown, was loading the trap with armfuls of ferns.

"Oh, Rosamond," she called out over her shoulder, "what ages you have been! I've got such lots of harts-tongue, and nearly a haystack of other ferns and grasses."

"You have been found in the act of robbing the woods, Amy; and here is Lord Airdrie himself. Lord Airdrie, Miss Jebb, caught hot-handed."

Amy turned round with a startled face, and found herself confronted by a tall man, who certainly looked like a landed proprietor; he was carrying a little dark-eyed boy on his shoulder.

Miss Jebb, who was much fluttered, gasped out a series of pretty apologies, which, needless to add, were laughed away.

Lord Airdrie had now completely recovered his self-possession; he firmly declined the loan of the cart, and putting Tommy down, he helped to stow away the ferns and grasses, and to assist Miss Balmaine and her friend into her cart, the latter chattering volubly all the time. Ere they drove off, Tommy, in answer to a smiling adieu, shrilly announced that "he wanted to kiss the pretty lady."

"Which?" asked his father, as he held him aloft. But Tommy, ignoring Miss Jebb's arms and smiles, put his small arms round the dark head that was bent towards him and administered a damp salute to Miss Balmaine's cheek.

"Good-bye, Tommy," she said; "good-bye, Lord

Airdrie. I hope you will find your way over to the Court. Colonel Brice will call, of course; but please don't be ceremonious. We have tennis and croquet every Thursday."

In answer to her invitation he raised his cap and muttered some unintelligible reply. As his eyes met hers point-blank, she felt a thrill of recognition and sudden rushing remembrance, that caused every atom of colour to fade from her face. He had eyes like Ronald Gordon, and the effect of this discovery unnerved her to such an extent, that she could scarcely hold the reins and guide the excitable cob, that was now tearing along the road towards his home and supper.

Lord Airdrie watched her as the cart disappeared out of sight. How strange that they should meet thus, and that she had not then a glimmering of the truth!

Tommy found his playfellow unusually silent as he was carried back to the house, still perched on his shoulder. His constant utterance, "Talk, father; talk to me," met with but scant attention—and who can wonder?

Miss Balmaine, too, was uncommonly distrait. She hated having the past recalled in any shape or form, and that man's eyes had evoked a spirit that she believed had long been laid. Her answers to Amy were at random. She did not join in her eulogies on Lord Airdrie's manners and appearance, or her raptures over his little boy. She felt every nerve unstrung. It was odd that a passing resemblance should shake her so much. She felt cold and trembling, although it was a sultry afternoon in July.

"There is no Lady Airdrie!" she answered in reply to a thrice-repeated question. "He said that the boy had no mother."

"Dear me! a widower. How all the women in the place will be exercised in their minds!" exclaimed Miss Jebb. "He would suit you, Rosie. Not young—you dislike young men; not bad looking, though he gives me the idea of being half starved—perhaps he is very high church and fasts a good deal—and he is of good family. You would scarcely turn up your nose at him—would you?"

"Dear me, what a little match-maker you are, Amy!" flipping the cob, who lashed out playfully. "I have told you at least a hundred and fifty times that I shall never marry. It is not a *façon de parler;* I am serious, and I would not advise you to speculate too securely on Lord Airdrie. He does not look like a marrying man: more like a man of one idea or hobby —shooting, or old prints, or stamps."

"The child is his heir, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"He looks about four or five. I wonder how old Lord Airdrie is?"

"Forty at least—probably more."

"Oh, Rosamond, not so much, surely! To me he looks as if he had had a long illness, or some great trouble which had aged him prematurely. What do you think?"

"Think! I've never given his age a thought; but, granting your idea to be the correct one, I dare say his worn face and grey hairs may be due to the death of his wife. *Some* men are like that. Here we are! So ho! Sugar, you need not stand on your hind legs; there, there, give us time to get down!"

CHAPTER XXI.

COLONEL DAVIDSON BRICE, as well as all the magnates in the neighbourhood, called upon Lord Airdrie, and he punctiliously returned their visits, and announced that he was come to reside among them for some time. His antecedents were wrapped in mystery, but when a man is rich, titled, and unmarried, people are not too searching in their inquiries. He was (as every one could see) a gentleman, had agreeable manners, and was well educated, and he told some one quite casually (who repeated it to a dozen eager listeners) that he had been poor enough in his day, and that his succession to the Airdrie title and estates was a most unexpected piece of good fortune. He further mentioned that he had spent some years abroad, and knew a little of the colonies; but all veiled queries, delicate hints, and artistic feelers with respect to Lady Airdrie met with no response. The housekeeper, Mrs. Trent, a middle-aged matron, with a generous figure, assured inquirers that she had never heard of her, and that Master Tommy had no recollection of any mother but some old woman called Mother Nan; and there was no picture of her ladyship anywhere, for (this is strictly, strictly private) his lordship's dressing-table and writing-room had been rigorously searched, and no photograph of any lady was to be found. He did not care for womenkind, it was

reported, either young or old. He read, he wrote, he rode about the country, he shot and fished, and liked a quiet domestic life, with Tommy for his sole companion.

They were an oddly contrasted couple, Colonel Brice thought, when he suddenly dropped in to lunch one showery afternoon, in that great panelled dining-room, with three men in waiting—Lord Airdrie at the foot of the table crumbling biscuits, whilst Tommy, in a high chair and pinafore, was doing a great business with some pudding and a spoon. This was his dinner-hour.

"Must be lonely work for you," remarked Colonel Brice, as he gobbled down mullagatawny. "First-class soup, this—as good as I'd get in Madras itself. Wonder you don't marry again, eh?"

Lord Airdrie looked at his guest with a long-measured glance, that the latter did not relish; he realized that his host considered that he had been guilty of a liberty.

"I think you said that young Handcock had a couple of sound horses, did you not?" was the only remark he made; and Colonel Brice, glad to see that he was offered a loophole, flung himself headlong into the question of promising hunters and covert hacks.

"I know a good deal about it, you see," he frankly announced, "for Miss Balmaine, my stepdaughter, is a wonderful girl to ride, and of course it is my business to take care that she is well mounted. Money no object," he added ostentatiously.

"I suppose not," acquiesced his listener, politely.

"By Jove! no; my dear sir, that girl has close on six thousand a year of her own. Not bad for a single lady, eh?"

"No, not bad," replied the other, abstractedly. He

was saying to himself, as he glanced at Tommy, "Six thousand a year, and five shillings a week for you——"

"Yes, six thousand a year!" continued Colonel Brice, consequentially; "and of course she has had dozens of offers—Italian marquises, French dukes, Austrian counts; but she would not look at one of them. I always tell my wife she'll never marry. She is waiting for an angel, or the man in the moon."

"Has she never——?" then he paused. No, he would not pursue the subject.

"Has she never had a love affair, I suppose you are going to ask?" and Colonel Brice became rather red in the face, gulped down a glass of sherry, and then brought out, in a bold, emphatic tone, the lie—"Never!"

"No doubt she has escaped a great deal."

"No doubt; and, of course, if she sticks to her whim and never marries, it will be a fine thing for the next heir—you understand?"

"Of course; I understand perfectly," assented Colonel Brice's host, whilst Rosamond's next heir drummed away with his spoon on an empty plate.

"The Balmaines are nearly extinct, but I dare say some one will turn up! They are a queer family. I believe old Madam Balmaine was as mad as a hatter."

She was certainly very mad on the only occasion on which Lord Airdrie had ever seen her. Now he began to understand, why she had considered it so essential that Rosamond should marry a lord! Rosamond had been an heiress, and, strange to say, Rosamond had unintentionally carried out the wishes of her ambitious old grandmamma!

The rain cleared off immediately after lunch, and Colonel Brice (who never wanted anything for the asking)

suggested that his host should drive him back to the Court, and have a cup of tea with the girls? The matter was put before him in such a way, that there was no evading it, and he submitted to his fate, and was soon bowling along in a high dog-cart, with Colonel Brice seated beside him, smoking one of his best cigars, and in an unusual state of satisfaction with himself and his surroundings. Here he was bringing home the great catch of the county, in spite of the chilling manner in which he had received that little hint about a second wife. As they turned into the avenue at a sharp trot, they overtook Miss Balmaine, and the sound of wheels on the gravel behind him, caused her light-hearted thoroughbred to plunge in a manner that would have unseated a less-accomplished horsewoman; and yet, as the driver remarked to himself, in the old days at Horton she had never even been on the back of a donkey! However, she evidently had it in her—the capability for developing into a first-rate equestrian; it was only latent, like a good many other traits. Miss Balmaine had already dismounted when the dog-cart dashed up to the door, and received them on the steps, looking remarkably well in her dark habit. The new arrivals followed her into the long, low drawing-room, which appeared to be half full, for Mrs. Brice and Amy were entertaining a number of visitors at afternoon tea. The hostess received Lord Airdrie with effusion, and made room for him, in spite of his protests, on an ottoman close beside her; whilst Rosamond sank into an armchair, which had been pushed forward for her by a young man—one of her numerous admirers. There were at least a dozen other people present, chattering in groups. A heavy-looking, much-beaded dowager shared the sofa with Mrs. Brice.

She was a certain Lady Mull, who lived on gossip, and to whom a bit of scandal was as the breath of her nostrils. She spent one half of her time in finding out other people's affairs, and the other half in relating what she knew. Lady Mull was delighted to meet Lord Airdrie, and was thirsting to question him about his domestic matters, his plans, and his prospects.

"What a pretty little boy that is of yours!" she began in a high reedy voice, as soon as she could get an opening. "He is like you. I hope you have a satisfactory nurse?"

"Tolerably, I believe, thank you."

"Did you engage her yourself?"

"Yes"—wondering what on earth she was driving at.

"I suppose she had first-rate references?"

"Yes, fairly good."

"Only *fairly* good?"

"Well, I suppose they were the usual thing."

"Will you think me impertinent—but I am much interested in your dear son—if I ask what wages you give her?"

"Fifty pounds," he returned, thinking her the most impudent woman he had ever come across.

"Fifty pounds! Well, I consider that *excessive*. However, under exceptional circumstances it may pass. One cannot be too careful, especially an inexperienced man like you, Lord Airdrie, in selecting a nurse for a motherless child," said the old lady, in her most impressive manner.

"Yes, yes, of course; I am aware of that; and I chose this woman for her face—that goes a long way with me."

An awful pause ensued, and then Mrs. Brice said indulgently—

"I'm afraid it does with most *men;* but"—in answer to a sharp nudge from her neighbour—"I do not think a pretty girl is quite—suitable."

"Who said she was young—and pretty?" interrupted Lord Airdrie. "I am sure I did not. She is surprisingly plain, and as old as you are, Mrs. Brice" (Mrs. Brice never forgave her visitor for this brutal speech). "You fancied that I was searching for a good-looking young woman. 'Honi soit qui mal y pense,'" glancing at Lady Mull. "I was thinking of an elderly person, with a pleasant countenance, who would be good to the little chap!"

"It is very few fathers who would make as much fuss about a child as you do," observed Mrs. Brice in her most conciliatory manner. "I am sure another man would send the boy to a preparatory school kept by ladies, until he was old enough to be packed off to Eton, and amuse himself about the world as a gay bachelor."

"Yes," returned her listener abstractedly. He was looking at Miss Balmaine, who had removed her hat, and was talking to a smooth-faced Cavalry boy with considerable animation.

"I suppose his mother died when he was born?" murmured the wary Lady Mull in semi-confidential tones. "In such cases a child is often detested. In fact, I know an instance where a man always ordered the baby out of his sight. I—I—— What, are you going already?" she exclaimed in dismay, seeing him suddenly rise to his feet. "Why, I was hoping to have a nice long talk with you. I feel such a neighbourly interest in you—you know."

He had determined that he would not allow himself

to be further cross-examined by this unknown sympathizer, and dexterously effected his escape with a murmured excuse to Mrs. Brice about an "important telegram."

"He has certainly a look of Ronald about the eyes," said Miss Balmaine, as she let her long hair down over her dressing-gown, ere ringing for her maid. "It is a curious resemblance, but not nearly so strong as it was the first day I saw him, thank goodness! I wonder if he could be some distant relation? Ronald's people were well connected; I remember his saying so. I wonder, very much"—addressing her reflection in the glass—"I really do wonder—and I am not often inquisitive—what is the mystery about his wife?"

CHAPTER XXII.

THE archery ball was a great social feature in the neighbourhood of Queen's Gift. There was no archery, it is true; but what's in a name? and old traditions must be kept up! This was one of the best, if not *the* best county ball, and was always well attended. People brought large house-parties from long distances, military came from Aldershot, the band and supper from London. The function was held in Arminster Town Hall, and no expense or trouble was spared to make it a thoroughgoing success. Of course the Brice family attended it, accompanied by Amy and Rosamond, Rosamond in a cloud-like white and silver gown—a French costume, the prettiest, and possibly the most costly, in the room.

"See what it is to be rich!" exclaimed Amy with an envious sigh, as her friend entered the drawing-room. "I cannot imagine how these French people can think of such models! their brains must be quite different to ours. Who else would dare to put a black velvet belt to a white ball gown?—and how well it looks!"

"I am sure you look quite as well in your English frock, Amy; blue is your colour."

"Yes," she answered discontentedly, "and I'm in the blues. I don't believe I shall get more than six dances, I know so few men. Well, at any rate, I won't be *seen*

sitting out; I shall go and hide between whiles in the cloak-room."

"How ridiculous you are! You will dance the soles off your shoes."

"I hope Lord Airdrie will be there," said Amy, as she fastened her glove, "and ask me to dance."

"I dare say he will," said the other girl coolly; "but why are you so particularly anxious?"

"Because I like him so much. I think he comes nearer to my beau-ideal of a man than any one I have ever met."

"Amy! Why, I have known at least ten of your beau-ideals."

"Well, you must allow that you have never seen one as charming as he is."

"Charming! I don't think he is charming at all; he gives me the idea of a man who wishes to go his own way, and has no desire to charm any one."

"Ah, that is because he does not take the trouble to make himself agreeable to *you!*" retorted Amy with a malicious little laugh. "He does not seem to like you. Most extraordinary, is it not?"

A similar idea had occurred to Miss Balmaine herself, so she merely coloured and made no reply, beyond a smile.

"Yes, my dear, I see you have noticed it too. He is the one man who appears to be invulnerable as far as you are concerned. I thought it so odd the night he dined here that he never once spoke to you. I was wondering if you had noticed it. I should like to know——"

"And I should like you to hurry, my good girl. What ages you have been getting into those gloves!"

"Rosamond!" exclaimed her companion suddenly.

"How I wish I was as pretty as you are! I declare you look lovely," contemplating her friend gravely. "You are the image of the picture that is called 'Beauty Balmaine.' You know who I mean—the girl with the muff."

"I am quite set up in compliments for the evening. I know I am—fair to see; but I really care very little for my pretty face; my face was my misfortune."

"What do you mean?" inquired Amy excitedly, for Rosamond, the most generous of girls in all other respects, was niggardly in speaking of her own feelings, or sharing her confidence.

"Never mind, dear," kissing her; "I only mean that if I had been ordinary looking and freckled, I would never have been bothered with admirers. There, I hear the carriage at the door. And you know how pleased the Colonel is if the horses are kept waiting."

On this occasion the horses were not detained long. The quartette from the Court were soon stepping out on the red-cloth-covered entrance to the Town Hall. Miss Balmaine was immediately surrounded by an eager circle of would-be partners, and in a few minutes her card was full, and she was floating round to the strains of "White Heather waltz." She danced beautifully, with a graceful *élan*, and a sort of swinging motion; and Lord Airdrie, who reluctantly found himself one of the stewards, could not keep his eyes from following a certain white dress and a dark-blue uniform.

He stood by a pillar under the gallery, gravely looking on, and wishing that he had remained at home. He had intended to hold aloof from society, but society and visiting cards and invitations had been forced upon him; it is not so easy to play the hermit. He had resolutely

refused invitations to dances and dinners, and set his face against this ball. Yet here he was, in spite of his own resolves; and actually one of the stewards! He had found it easier to yield than to invent scores of excuses, and resist the importunities of several strong-minded matrons—matrons with unmarried daughters.

"When it all comes out, what a row there will be!" he said to himself. "Old Scrivin was right; I have placed myself in a false position, and how I am to get out of it would puzzle the devil himself. I suppose I ought to have written, or made an appointment, and let her know who she is. That it is only the dead that don't come back! But that I bar living with a woman who is a customer to a baby farmer. What a hard face it is—for all its beauty!"

Here he was accosted by Mrs. Brice, a little breathless, in a very *décolletée* yellow gown, her yellow locks dressed high upon her head, a diamond aigrette in her hair, a collet of diamonds showing round her throat, an immense yellow fan in her hand. She had paused in a waltz to express, in an infinity of fluent phrases, her delight and surprise in meeting Lord Airdrie at the ball. In another moment she had resumed her waltz. She danced remarkably well. Who would suppose that the graceful little woman, with the twinkling golden shoes, was a grandmother? There in a doorway was Colonel Brice, nodding his bald head impressively, and slowly raising his hands up and down. Undoubtedly he was saying, "Quite so, quite so." Miss Jebb, in a pale-blue dress, floated by in the arms of a portly squire.

"Well, Airdrie, what do you think of our show?" inquired an old man with a grey beard, who stood beside him. He was Sir Everard Germaine, Lord-

lieutenant of the County—a wiry, square-shouldered little man, with a short white beard. He and Lady Germaine were old friends of the Balmaine family. As a boy he well remembered madam and her piebald hunter.

"I think it is first rate."

"Dances are not in my line. I'm beginning to feel 'anno Domini;' but I just look in here to please her ladyship. By the way, she wants to talk to you. She is sitting over there on the dais. Come along."

"I saw you standing over there all by yourself, Lord Airdrie," said a lively old lady, with remarkably white hair and black eyes, "and I thought it was only an act of common Christian charity to send for you to talk to me."

"Very kind of you, I am sure, Lady Germaine."

"Isn't it a crowd? There are four hundred; thirty more than last year. I'm quite proud, as I'm one of the patronesses. I suppose you don't know half of them?"

"No, nor quarter."

"Ah, you are a dreadful 'stay-at-home.' We must drag you out. That sort of thing grows on a man, and is very bad for him. Now, tell me, who do you think the prettiest girl in the room?"

"I say, Lady Germaine, that is rather a large order. And there are so many pretty girls."

"Yes; there's Lady Ida Hammond, and Susan van Holland, and the new bride, Mrs. Malling, and Miss Balmaine. On the whole, I think I will give her the palm. She is like her father. Tom was a handsome boy, but dreadfully erratic. All the Balmaines were wild. I'm always expecting Rosamond to break out."

"She does not look very like it, does she?" remarked Lord Airdrie, glancing at the young lady, where she stood facing them at the top of a set of lancers.

"No; though she is a Balmaine to the backbone. Thank Heaven, she does not take after her mother"—slowly turning her eyeglasses upon Mrs. Brice, who sat gasping on a seat on the dais, whilst her late partner fanned her with solicitude. "I see that she has the impudence to wear the Balmaine diamonds, though Tom was her last husband but two."

"She is a wonderful woman!" exclaimed Sir John Germaine. "I declare she might pass for thirty."

"She is an unscrupulous wretch. She would do anything for money or position. I'm positive that she frightened Tom into marrying her."

"Pooh, my dear! She was a pretty girl. A Balmaine cannot be frightened. They don't know what fear is. That girl there, I dare say, would probably spell it 'pheir,' so ignorant is she of the word."

"Who is the fellow she is dancing with?" asked Lord Airdrie.

"Oh, a gunner chap. A great carpet knight, but the chalkiest soldier going. They say he once fired off a live shrapnel shell at a field-day, just to please the ladies."

"Well, now, Lord Airdrie, you may take me into the tea-room, and get me a cup of coffee," said Lady Germaine, rising.

"Oh, excuse me; I have been very remiss."

"Not at all. I really only want to get away from the neighbourhood of that woman. When she comes near me I feel all goose-flesh. You see, I remember a good many years back. I can recollect the days when

she lived over her father's office in Arminster, and all the uproar in the county when she married Tom Balmaine. We are a very cliquey county, I can tell you, and hate interlopers. Well, I may as well have a cup of coffee now I'm here," she concluded, as she seated herself in the tea-room.

When her cavalier returned with the coffee, the apartment was full. The lancers were over, and Miss Balmaine was talking to Lady Germaine, whilst her partner waited beside her with ill-concealed impatience. Some passing elbow came into violent collision with Lord Airdrie's arm, knocked the coffee-cup out of his hand, and part of the contents were flung over Miss Balmaine's beautiful white gown. Instantly there ensued a great commotion, profuse apologies, proffered handkerchiefs, and loud and querulous lamentations from Lady Germaine. Miss Balmaine, "mistress of herself, though coffee fell," made light of the catastrophe.

"I am exceedingly sorry," said Lord Airdrie. "What can I do to show my contrition, and appease your indignation?"

"If you will kindly take me out of this crowd, I will go to the ladies' room and get my gown sponged. It is really nothing to make a fuss about," she said, rising.

"Shall I wait here and escort you back to the ball-room?" he inquired, as he left her to place herself in the hands of a sympathetic lady's-maid.

"Oh, thank you very much. Pray don't trouble; I shall be all right," she answered with an indifferent nod.

But when she emerged, in two or three minutes, with her damages repaired, she found him still waiting in the corridor.

"Oh, this is very kind of you, but most unnecessary."

"Not at all. Can I be of any further use to you?"

"Yes, please; you may get me a strawberry ice."

Two or three minutes later Miss Balmaine was sitting in a palmy nook, eating an ice, whilst Lord Airdrie held her fan, and waited in reluctant attendance.

"Do you not dance?" she asked suddenly.

"No. I don't think I have danced since I was one and twenty."

"Oh! I was in long clothes then, dancing in my nurse's arms."

"I suppose I appear very ancient to you?"

"Well—rather," with a little laugh.

"How old do you suppose I am?"

"Forty—forty-five. I am a dreadfully bad judge of people's age. Am I near the mark?"

"No," he answered. "But I suppose every one is the age they look, on a *l'âge de son cœur!*"

"A woman is the age she looks, a man the age he feels. Now, though I am not a man, I feel forty."

"Really, Miss Balmaine! But why?"

"Why?"—with a faint motion of her eyelids, and a half-gesture with her shoulders. "You would not be the least interested if I were to tell you. Why do you attend balls when you don't dance?"

"I come to make myself useful—to take old ladies in to supper."

"And to upset cups of coffee over young ones."

"Now, Miss Balmaine, I call that ungenerous."

"So it is"—with a girlish laugh. "Won't you sit down?"

"Thank you. But won't your partners tear me to pieces? You seem to be engaged three deep."

"Oh yes; but I'm tired of dancing, and I am not

going to trouble myself about them," she returned with the utmost nonchalance.

"Not even about the good-looking gunner with whom you danced three times?"

"Not even about the gunner you mention; and I do not consider him good-looking. One would think you were my chaperone! You seem to have watched me pretty closely; and I assure you that I am greatly flattered. All partners are the same to me"—holding out her little spoon. "If they dance well, I look upon them as so many dancing machines, that's all."

"And those who do not dance—what sort of machines do you call us?"

"Talking machines."

"Are there such things as flirting machines?" he inquired significantly.

"I really cannot tell you! I know nothing about them," she responded, handing him the ice-plate, and resuming her glove with much deliberation.

"Never flirted in your life?"

"No, never."

"Nor ever had a love affair?"

"I did not say *that*," she returned, as a wave of scarlet dyed her face and neck. What was there in this man's voice and manner that compelled her to tell him things she did not wish to reveal?

"Ah, I see you have had an experience," he observed dryly; "you have had a lover."

"*Lovers*, you mean," she answered, with a complacent little laugh. "But really, Lord Airdrie, I cannot allow you to be raking up my past. Supposing that I were to insist upon looking into yours! Do you know, that although I have never seen you till this summer, and

we have only met two or three times, I have a feeling that you and I are not strangers?"

Here her companion let fall her fan.

"I—I—seem to be dropping everything to-night," he muttered. "They say it's a sure sign of softening of the brain. You were—a—saying that you did not look upon me as a stranger."

"No, no; for I do look upon you as a stranger. But I have an odd feeling that perhaps we knew one another in some former life—some other state of existence."

"I see you are a Buddhist—and quite in the latest fashion!"

"Oh no; and I am quite sure you will think that I am wandering in my mind. My mother declares that all the Balmaines are mad. What do you say?" she asked.

"That you are as sane as I am," he answered, in a curious, suppressed tone.

"Thank you; that is very good of you. Pray don't tell any one of the dreadful nonsense I have been talking to you about a former existence, and the transmigration of souls, or my character for common sense will be lost. By-the-by, I don't remember ever to have seen you at a dance before."

"No. I'm afraid I sometimes sacrifice duty to personal inclination."

"You would rather remain at home with Tommy! How is my friend?"

"Quite well, thank you."

"And may I ask his age?"

"Nearly four."

"And when is his birthday?"

"Well, I am not quite sure of the—the exact day."

"Not know your own child's birthday?"—and she went off into a peal of laughter. "Well, you are an extraordinary man! Now, I suppose I must go back. I am engaged for the next waltz to two men, and my card is in a fearful muddle."

"How now, Miss Balmaine?" said a cheery voice behind them. "What do you mean by cutting my dance? I've been hunting for you for the last quarter of an hour—and it's nearly over; however, we might get one turn before it stops."

Thus Miss Balmaine was led away, and her recent companion, as he stood in a doorway and watched her dancing, said to himself—

"No wonder she feels as if she were not speaking to a stranger. She has not quite forgotten Ronald Gordon, nor expunged him from her mind as she did poor Tommy. Heaven and earth, what would all the old women say—ay, and young ones too—if I were to announce that pretty Miss Balmaine, the best dancer, the most popular girl in the room, is *Tommy's mother?*"

CHAPTER XXIII.

"I WONDER very much what it is that his lordship sees in *me?*" said Miss Jebb, as she meditated over her bedroom fire, with her chin in her hand. "I am not nearly as pretty as you are, Rosamond; and yet it is to *me* that he comes and talks, when you and I are together. Is it not extraordinary?"

Miss Balmaine, who had joined her companion for hair-brushing and conversation, admitted in her secret heart that it was most unaccountable; and it was by no means the first time that she had made this mental remark. The fact was patent, not merely to her own sensitive understanding, but to every one around her. Amy had good reason to boast that she was the only girl to whom Lord Airdrie paid the smallest attention. Certainly it was not of a demonstrative character; it merely consisted in walking with her from the church porch to the church gate, and occasionally sitting beside her at dances and tennis-parties—but this, all the experts declared, "meant a great deal;" and Mrs. Brice was in the seventh heaven when she contemplated her niece's prospects. Amy's impressionable heart was touched—considerably affected—for the twentieth time. Now, she assured herself and Rosamond, she had really met the right man at last (she had a wonderful capacity for falling in and out of love), and that if he did

not care for her, she would die of a broken heart. She was a girl whose emotions were on the surface, and who delighted in analyzing her feelings for the benefit of her friend, and her own satisfaction. She talked to her confederate at night, when they made long sessions in each other's rooms, and almost every night she made the same remark.

"Tell me, Rosamond—you, who have such insight into character—do you think he cares for me? Do give me your opinion, and I will abide by it." Miss Jebb, impulsive and vulgar little soul, had no reticence or shyness.

"How can I answer such a question?" was the invariable reply. "I am not in his confidence. He certainly seems to like talking to you; and that is a good sign. If he really is serious—and I hope he is, for your sake"—this was said in all sincerity, and, considering everything, was most magnanimous—"you will be a lucky girl!"

"I shall be Lady Airdrie," returned Amy, exultantly, as she warmed her toes on the fender, and thought, with a quick accession of colour, how delicious it would be to take precedence of most of the ladies in the neighbourhood, and walk into a room yards before Rosamond. "I wonder what his first wife was like?" she added meditatively. "One cannot help feeling an interest in her. She must have been quite young, poor thing! I wonder who she was?"

"I am sure I don't know," returned Rosamond, indifferently. "Has he never mentioned her in your interesting *tête-à-têtes?*"

"Never; indeed, he pointedly avoids the subject. He can be very reserved, and is not inclined to discuss

his own affairs. Still, I think he might say something about her, for we know absolutely nothing beyond the fact that she was the child's mother."

"Well, I fancy that a man does not generally make love to his second wife by talking of the first."

"He never makes what you call 'love' to me at *all*."

"Then what is the subject of his conversation?"

"The weather——"

"The weather!"

"Yes, and Tommy, and books. I hate book-talk, and I know he thinks me shamefully ignorant; and, oh, now that I come to think of it, he talks about *you!*"

"About me!"—pausing, brush in hand. "What do you mean? You are joking."

"I mean that he often"—nodding her head, with her eyes fixed on the fire—"leads the subject round to you, and leaves me to talk; and you know he is not much of a talker, and I am."

"You must be very hard up for a subject! I wonder what possible interest he can find in talking about me? I wish he would not. Cannot you contrive to substitute Mrs. Langtry, or Sara Bernhardt, or the sea-serpent? I am sure they will answer quite as well. Has he ever said anything to you, Amy?" she asked, as she leant forward and hammered the coals.

Amy had, she hoped, a happy future before her. What a contrast to her own dark past, into which she shuddered to look back. And if her sympathy, her money, her friendship, could avail Amy, they were hers most abundantly.

"No-o," returned the young lady, reluctantly; "he has never said a word that might not be posted on the

market cross. But I do think he likes me; and once he said that Amy was a pretty name."

"He did not ask if he might call you by it?" said the other, as she laid down the poker. "Oh—my locket!" she exclaimed in a tone of dismay.

"What locket?"

"It's gone!"—holding out a little black string. "It has dropped into the fender whilst I have been hammering the fire, Amy. I *must* find it!" And she threw herself on her knees and began to turn over the cinders.

"What locket? You never wear a locket."

"Yes, I do—I do; a little blue locket. I wear it at night. I——"

"Then it must be a love token."

"Yes, yes, yes. Amy, help me to find it; do you hear? I must get it, if I have to poke in the ashes for a week." And Rosamond actually began to search the cinders with her pretty little delicate hands.

After a long pause she gave a gasping sigh of relief.

"You have got it. Show it to me—do, Rosa. I show you everything. How can you be so shabby?"

"Well, there it is"—holding out in her hand a small blue-enamel locket, much dimmed with ashes. "That's *my* little skeleton," she said. "Please don't let any one know you have ever seen it."

"Of course not." And Amy turned it over with a fastidious finger. "Is there a photograph in it?"

"No"—closing her hand on it.

"Hair?"

"Yes."

"A man's hair?"

"Never mind," replied Rosamond, rising and pushing back her chair. Then she took a candle off the dress-

ing-table, and without another word, without even the customary good-night kiss, she trailed out of the room in her long white dressing-gown, leaving Amy with her hands resting on her knees, her mouth half open, gazing stupidly at the now shut door.

"What can there be in that locket? I never saw her look so agitated before. She takes everything so coolly, even the fright Mrs. Brice got when she thought she had lost her dressing-case, and all the Balmaine diamonds. That wretched little locket cost about a pound, and she burnt the skin off her hands to find it! I remember Lizzie Brice hinted at some hushed-up affair, and said that Rosamond was a girl with a past. Well, anyway it is no affair of mine," murmured this unusually discreet young lady. "My own troubles take up as much mind as I have got. But now I can understand why Rosamond is so indifferent to admiration, and why she is so snubby to men. She is a girl who has taken a love-affair to heart; and when she loves, she will go through fire and water. At any rate, I can answer for the *fire*."

To follow Rosamond, and leave Amy to foolish dreams of wealth and riches, we find her down on her knees at the dressing-table, gazing into the little blue locket. It only contained a tiny strand of fair hair.

The following afternoon the two girls were snipping off dead roses in the garden—the last roses of summer—and Amy, whose curiosity was of a more robust nature than she imagined, suddenly straightened herself, flung a mass of dead roses into her basket, and, with gaping scissors betwixt finger and thumb, said, in her most matter-of-fact way—

"I wonder what your lover was like, Rosamond?"

"My lover!"—with a violent start. "What put such a ridiculous idea into your head? I have no lover"—sheltering herself behind her namesake. "Are not your own experiences more than enough for you?"

"No. It is nonsense to suppose that a pretty girl like you has never been in love. Of course no end of men have been in love with you. Surely there must have been *one* you really cared for? Oh, Lord Airdrie, what a start you have given me! I had no idea you were behind me"—turning with a flushed face and a somewhat constrained air. What a truly providential circumstance that, for a wonder, she had not been talking of *him*, for he must have heard every word she said!

"I am just in time to hear you cross-examine Miss Balmaine, am I not? Good afternoon, Miss Balmaine."

"Yes, and she has not given me an answer yet."

"I am not sure that I understand the question," he returned, glancing from one girl to the other, from smiling Amy to pale Miss Balmaine, who, with averted eyes and grave face, was still snipping off roses. But had any one been watching her trembling hands, they would have noticed that, like the Reaper Death, she spared nothing. She cut off, indiscriminately, buds, half-blown buds, roses—ay, and leaves—and crammed them all into her basket.

Amy had no reticence. To be frank, Amy was Mr. Brice's own niece; and Amy was not a lady, so she gleefully said—

"I was asking Rosamond if she had ever been in love."

"You can scarcely expect Miss Balmaine to tell you that," said Lord Airdrie, glancing at Rosamond, who looked as white as the rose in her hand.

"No," she exclaimed, speaking at last in a low, hurried tone. "If I *had* anything to tell, you may be sure that I should keep it to myself, instead of blazoning it out in the open air to you and Lord Airdrie, and probably three or four of the gardeners; and, at any rate, it is not a subject for joking."

"But I was not joking," returned Amy, pettishly.

"Then so much the worse. Here, if you like I'll carry in your basket, as I cannot stand the sun any longer"—reaching over and possessing herself of Amy's share of dead leaves; and thus with a burthen on either arm, and with a slight bow to Lord Airdrie, Rosamond turned down a shady walk, and left Amy and the new arrival alone.

"I cannot think what is the matter with her to-day," said Miss Jebb piteously. "Other girls I have known have not minded talking of their love-affairs to one another." ("Servant girls," said her listener to himself.) "If you had not come up, I am sure I'd have heard who he was."

"I doubt it," rejoined her companion, so decidedly and so promptly, that she started, and looked at him amazed. But he was as impenetrable as usual, merely tracing something on the gravel with his cane.

"She is such an odd girl," pursued Amy. "Although I tell her everything"—spreading out her chamois-leather hands—"and she is really an awfully nice *confidante*, and takes an interest in everything—she never returns the compliment, and only speaks of her own affairs in a general sort of way. Of course, I have heard all about her life at Horton."

"Indeed," acquiesced her companion ironically; but irony was completely wasted in the present case.

"And about her going abroad, I've got an idea in my head."

"Yes?"

"She has had some horrible love-affair that has hardened her heart against men for ever and ever."

"Why should you say so?"

"Oh, for many reasons. She takes no interest in any man. She never has a good word for love, and she always speaks of it so bitterly. I got a clue last night."

A flash of interest sprang into her listener's eyes.

"A clue?" he repeated. "Are you an amateur Sherlock Holmes?"

"We were sitting over the fire in my room, and Rosamond dropped a locket into the ashes. You never saw such a fuss as she made about it. She actually went down on her knees, and raked out the whole of the cinders, and then went over them with her bare hands; and after all, when she *did* find it, it was a trumpery little blue-enamel thing that might have cost fifteen shillings. I suppose *he* gave it to her."

"I suppose so."

"I wonder who he is, and who he was. Don't you?" she asked impulsively. "I hate mysteries."

"No—I cannot say that I share your curiosity," he responded, rather coldly. "Why should we attempt to thrust ourselves into Miss Balmaine's private affairs?" Then, relenting as he met Amy's imploring and startled eyes, he added—"Well, never mind, Miss Jebb; it is a long lane that has no turning. Perhaps if you wait patiently you will find out the fellow's name some day. And now, will you show me the model bee-hives you were talking about the last time I saw you. Tommy

is so fond of honey, that I must set up an apiary, for nothing else will stand his consumption of that article."

And even Amy could take this broad hint that he wanted to turn the conversation. But why?

CHAPTER XXIV.

RETURNING one afternoon from the village by the foot-path through the fields, Miss Balmaine encountered Lord Airdrie. He was riding slowly down a lane as she happened to be stepping over a stile. The instant he caught sight of her he dismounted, saying—

"Just in time to be too late to assist you, Miss Balmaine. You make nothing of those sort of obstacles"—leading his horse, and walking on beside her.

He knew perfectly well that her graceful activity was the result of long practice among hurdles, stiles, and gates on Horton marshes.

"No; any lame old woman would get over *that* without help."

"Women can do most things without help nowadays," he remarked.

"And don't you think it is a capital thing that women are becoming more independent?"

"No; *I* am old-fashioned. I abhor the new woman, though I admit that I know but little of her, beyond what I hear and read. I have been out of the way of hearing of novelties for some time, and I must confess that the emancipated female gave me rather a severe shock."

"I don't see why she should. She earns her bread,

and goes about her work quietly. She relieves her relatives from her support."

"And she has a cigarette-case, a betting-book, a set of chambers, a self-satisfying reason for everything she does. She smokes, knows everything, and lays down the law like a Hebrew prophetess. I think woman's proper sphere is the nursery and home."

"I dare say!" cried Miss Balmaine, scornfully. "Men may play, but women must sweep! A woman in old days, was nothing more nor less than a hard-worked, unpaid cook, housekeeper, and head nurse."

"Not quite so bad as all that; and the young ladies had balls and tea-parties, plays, and the pump-room!"

"And were just a set of dolls! who wept if they saw a black-beetle—expired with confusion if a man took off his hat—and swooned away if he kissed their hands?"

"At any rate, they are a hardier race *now*," he remarked rather cynically.

"Ah! I see that you hanker after my great-grandmother—with her vapours—her little album—sandelled shoes—short waist—and sweet simplicity."

"Why not your grandmother?" he interrupted.

"Merely because she was not *your* style! She was a strong-minded person, who followed the hounds in a red coat, and horse-whipped an indiscreet admirer with her own muscular arm. By-the-way, that is a handsome horse of yours, Lord Airdrie. I admire his head—his fine, bold eye. Have you had him long?"

"No; only a very short time. Do you hunt?"

"Oh yes"—with a laugh. "I take after my grandmother in that respect. I am very keen indeed. I have persuaded my mother and Colonel Brice to remain in England until February."

"Then I shall hope to see you out. Do you wear pink?"

"No; grandmamma's coat is not among my heirlooms; but I wear the hunt button. I suppose you intend to hunt too."

"Yes; though I have not hunted for ten years."

"It is not a very stiff country."

"Oh; then, perhaps, in that case I may not tumble off at the first fence. As a boy I was hunting mad, and it was my one great ambition to be a master of foxhounds."

"You may achieve your wish yet."

"No. I have out-lived my enthusiasm. I am too indolent to bestir myself in that way."

"Indolent? I should never have suspected you of *that*."

"No; but then you have not had much opportunity of discovering my infirmities," rejoined her companion, with more truth than courtesy. "You were admiring my horse just now. May I return the compliment to your dog, and say that I have rarely seen a finer Gordon setter"—alluding to Roy, who was cantering ahead of them.

"Yes, he is a handsome dog—at least, so judges say. I don't know much about it."

"You know more about horses, I can see. Did you find him here?"

"No," she answered shortly. "I have had him for some years."

"And where did you get hold of him?" he pursued.

"He was given to me by a——" then she paused—she was not going to say friend or relative—so, after quite a remarkable hesitation, she brought out the word —"man."

"Gentleman?" he inquired, with an indifferent air.

"I—I—believed so then," she answered expressively, and her white lip quivered.

"And subsequently, you have had reason to change your mind," he proceeded, looking at her sideways, but her eyes were bent on the ground.

"Yes."

"Were there no extenuating circumstances?"

"No—none."

"What became of him?"

"He went to Australia nearly five years ago."

"And you have never heard from him since?"

"Never."

"Would you think me very impertinent if I were to ask his name?"

"Yes, I should; at any rate, the one he gave me was a false one."

"Then, I gather that this man, who was not a gentleman, gave you a dog—and a false name—and went to Australia five years ago—and the rest is silence?"

"I am shocked to find, that I have told you so much!" she exclaimed, coming to a full stop. "I really think you must have hypnotized me, Lord Airdrie. I have been—telling you things that I never—never meant to utter."

"Whatever you have told me unintentionally is sacred, Miss Balmaine—you may trust me implicitly."

"So *he* said," she retorted, with sharp scorn.

Her companion accepted the sneer in total silence.

"Do you know that you have a look of him sometimes?" she continued, in a rapid voice, half choked with agitation. "Only that he was young and handsome, and you are grey, careworn, and many years older.

Still, the likeness is there; I noticed it the first time we met."

"I am sorry," he muttered.

She looked at him interrogatively.

"Sorry, yes, because evidently I recall to your recollection one whom you think you have reason to despise."

"Think!" she echoed. "If you only knew all!"—the rest was not only silence, but——

His eyes flashed; and she stopped abruptly.

"After all, why should you know anything about me or my affairs?"

"No; although you have raised my curiosity to an inexpressible algebraic value."

"You must not mind me," she resumed, with recovered composure. "Five minutes ago I had no more idea of sharing my confidence with you, than I had of flying; but I was suddenly seized with an ungovernable impulse to talk of myself. A golden silence would have been far wiser; but, I suppose that, like others of my family, I am a little mad sometimes."

And she looked up at him with a pair of proud eyes that did not fall or waver. There was a sound of wheels behind them in the lane, and Rosamond glanced quickly over her shoulder, and then said—

"It is Lady Passingham. If she has a spare seat I shall ask her to drive me home;" and then she put up her hand as a signal to the coachman to stop.

"I am hailing your landau as if it was a hansom, Lady Passingham," said the girl, with a bright smile.

Could she be the same girl who had been talking to him but a moment ago, with her white lips and tragic eyes?

"Can you give me a lift home? I am rather tired."

"My dear Rosamond, I am enchanted to have your company. Good afternoon, Lord Airdrie. No use in offering you a seat, I suppose?"

"No, thank you; unless I may put on my horse as a leader?"

"No, no; he looks very wild; he might set a bad example to my steady pair." And with bows and smiles the two ladies drove away together; and Lord Airdrie mounted his impatient hunter, and putting him at a stiff rail, galloped homewards across the fields.

"I seem to have arrived at an opportune moment, my dear," said Lady Passingham. "You looked as if you had just rejected Lord Airdrie; and here am I, like the good fairy, carrying you away from his importunities and reproaches."

"You are quite wrong for once, Lady Passingham," said Rosamond. "I assure you I am the last woman in the world that Lord Airdrie would marry."

"Is he thinking of little Amy, do you suppose?" inquired Lady Passingham, who was a notorious match-maker, and had had a finger in many a pie.

"No; I really cannot say. I don't think he cares for women. How soon the leaves are beginning to fall. Dear me! how I hate ash trees—last to come, first to go."

"But, Rosamond, Lord Airdrie looked dreadfully white."

"White! Why, he is so dark as to be nearly black!"

"Now, don't be so flippant; you remind me some days of your grandmother."

"My grandmother was crazy, and this is one of her days," said Rosamond to herself.

"He, I repeat it, looked very white and agitated. I

declare I would give sixpence"—her ladyship was a notorious screw—"to know what you have been saying to him—come now?"

"We were talking about dogs and Australia, and——"

"Dogs and Australia! What an odd combination!"

"Yes, was it not?"

Lady Passingham examined her pretty companion narrowly. She looked unusually pale—and for a girl of her age, almost haggard. She was rather fond of Rose Balmaine, and resolved to leave her alone for the present; but she was firmly determined to find out ere long what she and Lord Airdrie had been saying to one another in Love Lane.

CHAPTER XXV.

"YES," thought Rosamond, as she sat behind Lady Passingham's big bay steppers, "perhaps if she knew all about *me*, she would stop her carriage and set me down on the roadside, or fling me into the dust!"

Her marriage had never been proved. No measures in the shape of searching registers and advertising had ever been taken; her certificate was not forthcoming—or her husband. She could not identify or name the church, and that was enough for her friends. All they required, for the present, was the use of her money; later on, say in five years' time, she would reflect a certain amount of lustre on them, by making what is called a brilliant match.

Days and weeks elapsed, and Rosamond saw nothing of Lord Airdrie, and when she thought of him and her crazy half confession, her face burnt like flame, even in the dark. However, she heard of him constantly. Was he not the theme of Amy's active tongue? And almost daily she encountered Tommy, riding a tiny Shetland, led by a groom; and although she nervously avoided his father, she and Tommy were the best of friends. It was no uncommon thing for her to walk a mile beside his rat of a pony, endeavouring to restrain her fiery bay's rapid drifting gait to a pace in accordance with the pony's short legs. Tommy was devoted to the pretty lady, and told his father a great deal about her,

and how he wished she would come and live with them, a request his parent received with the utmost composure, but which nearly caused the death of the stout butler from suppressed convulsions. He and the upper servants had their own ideas about his lordship and pretty Miss Balmaine. Why was she so bent on riding with his child, and making a fuss over him? There was such a thing as "making love to the child for the sake of the nurse;" and indeed Miss Balmaine's efforts had their unqualified sanction. The house was dull and lonely without a lady; it seemed so unnatural to see his lordship and the boy sitting in those big rooms alone. Of course there were dinner-parties now and then for gentlemen, and a few gentlemen had come to stay and shoot; and once a lawyer, who had sat up talking until two in the morning. But his lordship did not care for company; he was fond of sport, and Tommy: "he were *rare* fond of him," they allowed. Certainly Tommy was a child of whom any parent might be proud. Early hardships, open air, frugal fare, had not stunted his growth; on the contrary, he looked nearer five than four. Poor boy! no one knew his birthday (though it was in the parish register at Horton), and his father, for shame's sake, invented a date, which was duly kept. He had a high-born aristocratic air, this gutter child, this once ragged urchin, whose tender white arms and shoulders had borne traces of bruises and red weals, "Mother Nan—her mark." These were undeniably the fault of the boy's mother, who had deserted him, and for these blows his father would never, never forgive her!

It was strange. "Was it instinct," he asked himself incredulously, "or was it accident, the extraordinary fascination Rosamond had for the child, and he for her?"

He was constantly talking of her, of the stories she had told him, the flowers she had picked for him, the lovely rabbits she made with her handkerchief; he even permitted her to kiss him, as a great, great favour, and went so far as to name her in his prayers. "God bless me, and make me a good boy; and God bless father, and all our friends, and the pretty lady, and Kelpie." Tommy was desired to omit Kelpie, the pony, from his orisons, but the pretty lady was suffered to remain. Ronald listened in silence. After all, why should she not be included? She was Tommy's mother (though both she and Tommy were ignorant of the fact), and what a pretty pair they made together. He could not help remarking this, as he overtook them one evening near the park gates, both riding—she on her bay thoroughbred, which she reined in with difficulty as she stooped down to listen to Tommy; he was eagerly relating some story, at which they both laughed. Yes, she laughed quite a merry girlish laugh, worthy the days of Horton.

Ronald rode slowly behind them on the grass, enjoying the picture, and building fancies of "what might have been;" but with a sudden start, the recollection of Mother Nan's squalid den came sharply back to him; and trotting up beside them as if he had only just arrived upon the scene, he lifted his cap, and "hoped Miss Balmaine was well?"

Miss Balmaine hated to be caught by Lord Airdrie conversing with his son; her advances to the child were stolen and surreptitious. She bade Tommy good-bye, and with a stiff bow to Tommy's father she wheeled about her fretting horse, and was soon out of sight.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A WEEK later, just as the Brice family were assembled in the drawing-room, awaiting the sound of the dinner gong, a servant entered with a note on a salver—his usual stately demeanour slightly hurried—and handing the missive to Miss Balmaine, said—

"And the carriage is waiting for you, miss."

"Who can it be from?" ejaculated the young lady as she carelessly tore it open.

"Read it aloud," said Amy, eagerly.

And Rosamond read out the following epistle, which was inscribed in a common-looking hand—

"MADAM,

"Master Tom has met with a bad accident. He keeps asking for you, and Lord Airdrie begs you will come without delay. We don't think the child will live through the night.

"Your obedient servant,

"MARTHA TRENT."

The note dropped out of Rosamond's hand as she read the last sentence.

"How awful!" exclaimed Amy, picking it up. "Poor little Tommy! I suppose his father is nearly crazy—the housekeeper has written this."

"But will you really go, Rosamond?" said her mother fretfully. "You cannot be of the least *use*, you know; and it will look so odd. What *will* the servants think?"

"I must risk shocking the servants, but I shall certainly go, and at once."

"What? without your dinner!" cried Colonel Brice, whose dinner was his god.

"Do you think I could sit through ten courses while that poor child is calling for me?"

"My dear girl, you cannot possibly go alone—the proper person to accompany you is your father." And Mrs. Brice looked imploringly at her husband.

"*I'm* not going out at this hour," he answered, "running after Rosamond's fads, and other people's sick children."

"And I cannot go myself, my neuralgia is so bad; and besides, the sight of an accident upsets me for weeks," protested Mrs. Brice; "I'm so sensitive—so distressingly tender-hearted!"

"Why should not *I* chaperon Rosamond?" said Amy.

"Because you'd only be in the way," retorted her aunt; "two girls would be worse than one. Rosamond, you must take Wheeler—you really must. Just think of what people will say! A bachelor's house, and you an unmarried girl."

"In the chamber of death there is no Mrs. Grundy," returned Rosamond. "I must go and get a cloak of some kind. You need not expect me till you see me."

"The Colonel shall fetch you at ten o'clock," screamed her mother after her, as she hurried out of the room.

Miss Balmaine started off without Wheeler after all,

and was driven rapidly along the roads and lanes that intervened between the Court and Queen's Gift. As she dashed up to the portico she found the door already open, and Mrs. Trent waiting to usher her into the house.

"I heard the carriage coming, miss. You've lost no time," she remarked, looking at the young lady's bare head and evening gown. "The child is wearying for you, and by all accounts he is going fast," she continued, as she conducted Miss Balmaine through the immense pillared hall, and up the shallow oak staircase.

Here and there in the background, in passages and corridors, Rosamond was conscious of groups of whispering servants, of one or two women with aprons to their eyes, and of a sense of some great trouble hanging over the whole establishment.

"I suppose the doctor is here?" she asked, scarcely above her breath, as they walked down a long carpeted corridor.

"Doctor? to be sure! and one coming from London too. His lordship would have every doctor in the land if he had his way. He is nearly beside himself. You'll have a sore time with them both, miss, I give you fair warning; but I know you have a stout heart, as well as a kind one. It's terrible for the poor little fellow to die"—weeping as she spoke—"and no women-folk here but me and Susan. You must stand in the place of her that's gone—for one day."

"You mean——?" hesitating.

"I mean the child's mother. This is the room," opening as she spoke a door into a large apartment, in which was a shaded lamp and a little white bed.

The bed, of course, contained Tommy, and Tommy's father was standing beside it. When the lady in white gown and a long cloak entered, the child's feeble exclamation of joy caused him to turn his head.

"This is very good of you, Miss Balmaine," he said, advancing to meet her. "I knew you would come. Tommy has been asking for you continually.—It's merely a question of a few hours," he added in a low voice, which shook a little.

"Oh, you must not say that *yet*," she returned in a quick whisper; "remember 'where there is life there is hope.'"

"Not much *here*, I am afraid," he replied with an eloquent shake of the head, turning once more to the patient.

The local doctor (an elderly man, with a lugubrious expression) and Miss Tait both looked their amazement — Susan pointblank, and the doctor over his glasses. Miss Balmaine!—what had brought her?

Their presence was totally indifferent to that eccentric young lady. She went over at once and knelt by Tommy's bed, and taking his hot little hand in hers, said, "My poor Tommy, what has happened to you?"

"It was the big cart," he answered faintly, fixing his bright eyes on her face. "It came so fast, and tumbled us down—Kelpie and me."

"That will do, Tommy; you are not to talk," said his father. "Yes, I'll tell her all about it"—in answer to the child's appealing look. "You must know," addressing himself to Rosamond, "that Tommy and Jones went for their usual ride, and were coming home about half-past four, when, at Clipton Cross, Tommy says he heard a great noise, and shouting, and galloping,

and a brewer's cart and a runaway dashed round a corner before he could get away, and he remembers no more. Jones picked him up and carried him home, and here he is. Is not that it, Tommy?"

Tommy nodded, and then whispered eagerly, "Tell about my *arm*"—the left arm, which lay outside the counterpane in splints.

"It was broken; and I am sure your—your kind friend will be pleased to hear what a brave boy you have been, and how you never said a word when it was set."

"Are there any other injuries?" inquired Rosamond in French.

"Yes"—with a pained expression—"his ribs. Dr. Jones does not quite know the extent, but he believes it to be—mortal. He is waiting until the London doctor comes to make an examination."

"And when will he be here?"

"Not for another hour." It was now a quarter to nine.

At this moment the little invalid interrupted, and, turning his eyes on Miss Balmaine, whispered, "Make me—a rabbit."

"Come, come, this talking won't do," protested the doctor, coming over. "The child is in high fever. Does Miss Balmaine know what a serious case it is?"—and he transfixed the young lady with a pair of pale blue eyes that were enormously magnified by his spectacles, and had a most alarming effect. "Of course, Lord Airdrie, I have no right to interfere with your visitors, but I question very much if this lady is not doing more harm than good. She would be far better away—she would, indeed."

"I wish Miss Balmaine to remain," replied Lord

Airdrie, decisively. "I will be surety that she does more good than harm."

If, as he said to himself, the child was going to die, who had a better right to be present than his mother? But how was she to know? How could he enlighten her? This was a question that he had been painfully debating with himself all evening, and as yet had been unable to come to any settled conclusion.

The doctor shrugged his shoulders expressively, and walked back to the fire, watch in hand. He had made his protest, and done his duty. His expression, as he glanced over at the couple, said, "Do as you please; I am not responsible; I wash my hands of the whole affair."

"The doctor is cross," remarked Tommy, in a faint voice. "He thinks I am going to be deaded. Am I, father?"

"Try and go to sleep, Tommy boy. We must not talk any more," said his father in a husky voice.

Lord Airdrie went over and pushed back the curtain, and stood looking out on the moon-flooded park for some time in silence. Then he went and joined the doctor by the fire, and held a long consultation with him in a low tone—a consultation which did not raise his hopes, for when he returned to the little cot, and stood beside Rosamond, his face looked ashen, and beads of perspiration stood upon his brow. He had made up his mind to tell her. But what was this? Was the child already gone? or was he asleep? Oh, the blessed relief from that second of agonizing suspense. His breathing still rose and fell. Tommy was fast asleep, with his hand clutching Miss Balmaine's fingers.

"Hush!" she said, looking up. "He has just dropped

off. He will do yet, I feel sure. Once they said that I was going to die, and here I am still, you see! I don't think he is quite so feverish as he was, and I don't believe he is as much injured as he"—nodding over at the doctor—"supposes."

"I wish I could share your opinion!" rejoined her listener; "but I'm afraid, from what he says, that there is very little hope. He thinks the spine is injured; and if you had seen the child when Jones brought him home, covered with dust and blood, you would wonder that he is alive."

"Poor Tommy!" she said. They were speaking in whispers. "How dreadful it sounds! a runaway going over him. But his little bones are more easily knit than ours, and he has always seemed such a strong, healthy child."

"You will be tired kneeling so long. Could you not slip away your hand now?"

"No, on no account. I am not the least tired. I could kneel like this for hours, if necessary."

"You appear to understand children. I suppose you are accustomed to them?"

"No, indeed; I have never had anything to say to them—though I am very fond of them, especially little babies, but I have never seen a baby until it was at least six months old—"

"Never!" in a suppressed voice, and a swift spasm passed over his face, leaving it stern and fixed.

"No, never. Is it not odd? I am past two and twenty, but I have never happened to come across infants."

Could she lie to him across a child's sick bed? Could she play the hypocrite even *here?* He looked over at her with an indescribable expression

—an expression of scorn, struggling with incredulity. She met his glance with a feeling of profound amazement. His eyes held hers fast—she felt compelled to meet their stern, insistent look. What could he mean? He could not know of the infant she had never seen, or of the little nameless grave in the shadow of the old church at Horton, and yet his face was that of an accuser. As she gazed back at him, she grew white to her lips, and in that pallor he read her guilt.

He was about to speak,——

"Sir George, he has come, please," murmured a voice close by him, and there stood Mrs. Trent, and in the middle of the room a cheerful, clean-shaven little gentleman, who advanced briskly to the bedside with noiseless steps.

"This is our little patient—Lord Airdrie, I presume?"

"Yes," he returned; "I am thankful to see you—you managed to get a special after all?"

"Yes—lost no time—urgent case. Child seems asleep. Ah," now turning to the other medical man—"I shall be glad of a few words with you," and bowing to the young lady who was kneeling by the bed, with the child's hand in hers—"Lady Airdrie, I presume?"

To this pointblank question Lord Airdrie made no reply for quite two minutes, Sir George, who had evidently taken silence for consent (or forgotten the matter), being busily engaged in feeling the pulse and taking the temperature of the child, who lay beneath his searching gaze flushed, breathing heavily, and still sound asleep.

"This lady is a friend of the boy's, who has been kind enough to come in answer to his urgent request," explained Lord Airdrie.

"Oh!" was all Sir George answered, giving her a long, exhaustive look. "Just lift him as gently as you can," nodding to her. "Don't wake him if you can help it; I want to take his temperature and to put this tube under his arm."

This raising up without rousing the patient was easier said than done, for although Rosamond lifted him in the very gentlest manner, he moaned, started, and opened his eyes.

"You will soon be all right, my fine fellow," said the London surgeon reassuringly. He was renowned for his sympathetic bedside manner.

"Are you the new doctor?" asked the child.

"I am—I have come to try and make you well."

"You won't kill me—I don't want to die," his under lip quivering, "and be put in a box, like the gardener's little girl—they said the doctor killed her."

"No, no—no fear. Miss—or Mrs.—I beg your pardon," turning to Rosamond; "I did not catch your name."

"My name is Balmaine—Miss Balmaine," she answered.

"Well, Miss Balmaine," in a hurried whisper, "for goodness' sake keep him quiet; don't let him talk and excite himself in this way. He seems attached to you—use your influence;" and in a still lower key, "I suppose he has no mother?"

Rosamond shook her head. The child had never known a mother—so Lord Airdrie had assured her.

"Then you must do your best, and keep him still, whilst I examine him. I don't want to have to administer an opiate if I can help it, and I must see if he has any ribs broken or internal injuries." And beckoning his brother professional to his side, they held a long consultation in an undertone.

"Now, Tommy, I know that you are going to show the doctor, and your father and me, what a fine, brave boy you are," said Rosamond in a soft, coaxing voice. "He wishes to see where you have hurt yourself, and how soon he can cure you. He won't give you any more pain than he can help, darling,"—now stooping over him with brimming eyes, and kissing the little flushed face. "I wish *I* could bear it for you. You'll be a brave boy, won't you, Tommy?"

"Yes, if I may hold your hand," he returned, in a tremulous tone, and looking at her appealingly.

"We are going to make an examination now," said Sir George to the child's father. "This young lady appears to have plenty of nerve—she will be better than you. Everything depends on this. We shall soon be in a position to tell you whether it is one thing or the—other."

"You mean—life or death?" said Lord Airdrie under his breath.

A nod was all the great surgeon vouchsafed as his reply. Had it been a woman, he would have softened the announcement, but to a man what did it matter?

Lord Airdrie went over and stood in the recess of a window whilst this vital question was being probed. No—he had not the courage to stand beside the bed during this, to him, awful moment, this period of agonizing suspense. Strong as he was, he trembled in every limb, as he leant his elbows on the window-sash to steady himself, and gazed out on the beautiful autumn night.

How dared the world look so calm and peaceful, he asked himself, when Tommy was dying? He knew he was going to die—he was certain of it; it was a judgment

on him for having made an idol of the child. Tommy had crept into his heart that time at Horton when his heart was desolate and empty. When his house had been left unto him desolate, Tommy had filled it! How long he had been standing there he could not guess. Many hours? He was brought back to reality by a touch upon his arm. It was Miss Balmaine. She looked pale and agitated—nay, she was crying; two or three large tears were trickling down her cheeks.

"I see—I know!" he exclaimed, turning to her with quick apprehension written on his face. "You come to—tell me—the worst."

"I do not," she returned eagerly; "I come to tell you the best," placing her hand on his trembling arm. "He will be spared to you—he will live."

A long gasping breath was his only answer, as of a spirit released from some leaden load. Her words were immediately corroborated by the doctors, who now joined them.

"I am glad to say that it is not as serious as we anticipated," said Sir George—"a broken arm, a few cuts and bruises, and a slight predisposition to fever—that is all. Keep him cool and quiet, and he will be all right. We have given him an opiate, and Miss Balmaine has promised to sit up with him. You and I, and our friend here," glancing at the other practitioner, who seemed much relieved that the case was less critical than he supposed, "are best out of the room—he only wants perfect quiet, you know, and to be left to the women.

"I suppose," he said, as he followed his host into the library and cast himself into an armchair, "that boy upstairs is your only child?"

"Yes," replied Lord Airdrie, turning from giving some

instructions about supper and bed for the great medical man.

"And being the heir, of course it's a serious thing," continued the other in the most matter-of-fact voice.

Apart from his professional capacities (which were splendid), Sir George was an odd character. He loved a good gossip, and had many opportunities for picking up bits of unknown or uncommon family history in the course of his enormous practice and many peregrinations —not for circulation, but for his own edification. Here was a new field for him! He would like to know more about this interesting widower with one child, a child attended with the utmost devotion by a beautiful girl—unmarried. It was an unusual situation. He was really anxious to learn something more concerning this present tenant of Queen's Gift, and over a most *recherché* little supper—served in the smaller dining-room, with every adjunct of taste and luxury, and the best of wines—he contrived to put his wish into words. His entertainer was silent and abstracted, and appeared to be far away in his thoughts, yet endeavouring to play the part of host to his two professional guests.

"You came in for the title and estates quite unexpectedly, did you not?" remarked Sir George, as he set down an empty glass with a compression of the lips that bespoke the connoisseur.

"Yes, quite unexpectedly."

"You were of a distant branch, though in the direct line. Extraordinary luck! Three were cut off, I may say in their prime—no heirs. You were a sailor or something of that sort, were you not?"

"Was I? Why should you think so?"—with a slight smile.

"Because you have the tanned, sunburnt appearance of a man who has been greatly exposed to the weather, and are prematurely aged. Like most sailors, you are not as old as you look."

"No, I believe not."

"And so you were not a sailor?"

"No—the sea has no charms for me."

"I suppose you have been abroad a good deal?"

"Yes" (if Crampton's reef was abroad).

"Married out there?" refilling his glass carefully.

"No, I married at home"—very stiffly.

"What the ——," using bad words, "was it to this inquisitive old ass where he married, or where he had been?" and possibly something of this was expressed in his face, for Sir George prudently tried another tack, and remarked—

"Lucky thing for *you* you have a friend like that girl upstairs—a real Samaritan. I can see that she is not one of those young women who go on with a lot of humbug about conventionality and Mrs. Grundy. I am sure she could not have been more gentle and tender with the child if she had been his own mother."

At this remark a sudden wave of colour crept over Lord Airdrie's dark face, and he was about to speak when the local doctor remarked—

"Oh, the name of Balmaine is voucher for *any* eccentricity. They are a family that have always done just what seemed good in their own eyes. Old madame feared neither man, woman, nor devil; but all the Balmaines have soft hearts—and are passionately fond of children."

"Then you must try and persuade the young lady to stay a few days," said Sir George. "And talk of an angel—here she is."

For as he spoke, the door opened, and Rosamond entered with a long sable-lined cloak over her arm.

"I've just come to say good-bye, Lord Airdrie. I'm sorry I cannot stay; the carriage has been sent for me, with a note from my mother, and I must go."

"Must you?" he echoed, rising and accompanying her into the ante-room. "I am truly sorry to hear it; but of course I will not venture to impose on your great kindness"—looking at her wistfully.

"Tommy is over the worst: he is asleep. You must not be alarmed now."

"I don't know how I am to thank you," he returned, in a constrained voice. Never in his life had he felt so near forgiving her as then, when they stood alone in the dimly lit ante-room, looking into one another's eyes—she with sympathetic reassurance, he with—what? An expression she had never yet seen in his rather stern countenance.

He felt that he could not trust himself to speak—that his voice undoubtedly would tremble and betray him—so he merely offered her his arm in silence, and conducted her through the hall, and placed her in the waiting brougham, standing bareheaded on the steps whilst the carriage rolled away, and was presently lost to sight round a bend in the avenue.

On his way back to his guests, he passed a long mirror in the corridor, and, as if struck by a sudden thought, halted before it and looked at his reflection.

A handsome man still—dark, grave, bearded. "She has never guessed," he said to himself, "though she sees the resemblance. She said I was old, and grey, and sallow. I am aged and tanned, but not so *very* grey. After Crampton's reef, I wonder I have any hair at all.

They say women have sharp eyes and long memories. I don't believe it! Yet how could she know me? I have done my best to disguise myself. Why am I disgusted because I have succeeded? The perversity of human nature!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

"ROSAMOND," said Amy, coming into their joint sitting-room one morning, "I've just heard such a piece of bad news!" As she spoke she threw her hat upon the table and subsided into a chair.

"And what may it be? Nothing *very* dreadful, I can see by your face."

"Then my face tells stories, for it is most—most hateful!"—puckering up her pretty little mouth, and showing strong symptoms of tears. "Lord Airdrie is going away to-morrow, and he has never been over here for ages, nor come to say good-bye, nor sent a line, nor—nor anything."

"Perhaps he may come yet," said Rosamond; "it is only three o'clock."

"No, he won't. He has driven into Alchester. I saw him pass the gates just now, and his man told Wheeler that he goes to-morrow morning."

"Amy, you don't mean to tell me that you talk about Lord Airdrie to Wheeler?"

"No, I don't; but I shall be driven to it yet. You are so unsympathetic! Here have I been waiting, day after day, ever since the child got better; never going beyond the lodge, for fear he should call and I might miss him. He ought to have come after all the attention he has paid me. I'm the only girl he has ever

spoken to, and it's most abominable, and dishonourable, and cruel——"

Then she paused to take breath, and Rosamond, after surveying her for some seconds in silence, said—

"My dear Amy, you should never set your affections on a man, unless you are quite certain that he cares for you. Your heart, my dear, is set like a hair-trigger—ready to go off on the smallest provocation. Now, pray don't be angry; I'm only speaking for your good."

"Oh yes; that is what people always say when they want to be disagreeable. And it's very fine for *you* to talk, who are as cold and as hard as marble. But I'm not a block of ice; I'm a human being."

"Well, let us go carefully into this case of yours against Lord Airdrie. You assured me the other day that he had never said a word to you that might not be posted up in the market-place, never written you a line, never pressed your pretty fingers, never asked you to dance; so I really fail to see what grounds you have for expecting him to come here and lay his heart and his coronet at your feet."

"That is just your cold-blooded, horrid, sarcastic way of looking at things—and your jealousy!" cried her companion, crimson with temper; and not only with that, but with a secret conviction that what her unimpassioned, cool-headed adviser said was true, and how hateful sometimes is the plain truth. "You know you are disgusted because he never noticed you."

"Come, come, Amy! you must not say such things," returned the other, good-humouredly. "You will only be angry with yourself afterwards. It is quite true that Lord Airdrie has never noticed *me;* but what has that to do with the present subject? I am not jealous.

Why should I be? I shall be very glad to see you happily married; but I don't want you to make yourself miserable about a man who apparently does not care a rush about you."

"Then, why—why"—stammering hysterically—"did he always come and sit beside me, and talk to me?"

"I suppose he liked—or, rather, does—like you. But, my dear child, there is a wide ocean between liking and love."

"You are talking like a book. Pray, what do *you* know of love?"

"Love is the sweetest and most fatal interest in life—I know *that* much."

"I wonder how you learnt your experience?"

Dead silence.

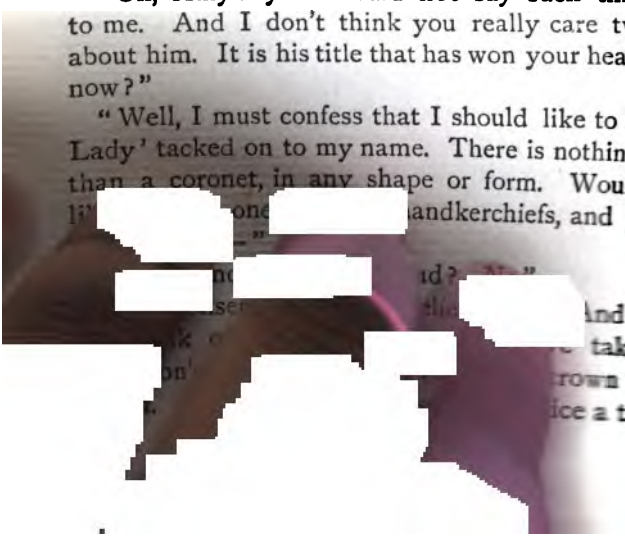
"Rosamond, do you really think he means nothing?" said Amy, harking back to her own affairs.

"Am I in his confidence?"

"I think he has behaved shamefully."

"Oh, Amy! you should not say such things, even to me. And I don't think you really care two straws about him. It is his title that has won your heart—come, now?"

"Well, I must confess that I should like to have 'my Lady' tacked on to my name. There is nothing prettier than a coronet, in any shape or form. Wouldn't you li[illegible] on[illegible] andkerchiefs, and your car-



pick-axe sticking out of it. I never knew anything so preposterous. Oh, here is aunt!"

"Well, Amy and Rosamond," said Mrs. Brice, from the doorway. "Dear me, what a litter of work and books! Why don't you shut the piano when you have done with it? I came in to ask you what you think of this body Wheeler has trimmed for me."

"I think it is rather stiff," said Rosamond,—"the lace."

"Yes, of course it is! Oh, how I wish I had my old darzi Naim Khan, from Mussori! He *was* a comfort. Such a contrast to these stuck-up maids I have had, who think of nothing but their own appearance—and amusements. There he sat, from eight in the morning till five in the evening, merely going away to smoke his hooka. And I just tossed things out to him—it was all the same, from a sofa cover to a tea-gown,—and he worked away like a horse in a mill. What I came to say was this, which of you will come with me to call on the Robinson Scotts? The carriage will be round in a quarter of an hour. That son of theirs in the Lancers is at home"—glancing expressively at Amy. "I met him some years ago, at Umballa."

Half a loaf was better than no bread, thought Amy—better to drive over to the Robinson Scotts than remain moping at home, thinking of Lord Airdrie, who apparently never had bestowed a thought on her.

"I can't take you both," continued Mrs. Brice, "for I hate more than two in the Victoria; and a pack of women crowding into a drawing-room is—a hateful spectacle."

"Pray don't think of *me*," said her daughter. "I shall probably take Roy for a run; and you know I don't care about visiting."

"I wonder how it feels?" said Rosamond to herself,

as she stood on the steps of the portico, and watched the rapidly receding carriage and two exceedingly smart parasols. "To have no pride, and no reticence, people are just as they are born, mentally and bodily, and everything is constitutional and hereditary. Our ancestors have much to answer for. Poor Amy cannot help herself, neither can I. I must blurt out home truths, just like my grandmother, and she must wear her heart upon her sleeve for daws to peck at. Now, I would sooner, far sooner, die, than confess to any human being all she said to me to-day. Imagine baring one's inmost thoughts, and making them stand out in shameless nudity! Amy's mind is a public thoroughfare! Come along, old man; I'll give you a run in the park, and for once we will imagine that we are back on the Marshes."

An hour later, Lord Airdrie's high dog-cart was bowling up the avenue. After all, he had come to make his adieux in proper form; he had stayed away from the Court, not to slight Miss Jebb, but to avoid Miss Balmaine. The restraint he was obliged to put upon himself in her society was too great to be endured. On several occasions he had been within an ace of breaking down the barriers, declaring himself, and saying, "Rosamond, don't you know me? I am the husband you disowned, and Tommy is the child you deserted." Once or twice the temptation had been almost irresistible. So far he had withstood it successfully, but for how long could he maintain this siege of natural feeling?

Not for a day, were he to live in her constant society. Gradually he felt the hold over himself growing weaker, and the reins of resolution slipping from his grasp. He would escape—he would leave the neighbourhood.

"But why go at all?" pleaded extenuating circumstances. "Why not discover yourself, and forgive her *all?*"

"For many good, sufficient, and weighty reasons," replied justice, cool common sense, and unappeased resentment, as he thought the matter out through hours of lonely reflection. Rosamond would no doubt be delighted to find him no longer a poor struggling engineer, who had his way to make in the world, but a wealthy man, who could surround her with luxuries, and make her a peeress! Were he a miserable, ragged, broken-down pauper, what sort of a welcome would she give him? She would turn from him in disgust, of this he was quite positive; in spite of his claims, in spite of her affection for Tommy, she was false-hearted and worldly to the core. Would he with his eyes open take back a wife who had said she was no wife, who lived under her maiden name, and passed in society as an unmarried girl? Would he restore to Tommy the mother who had cruelly deserted him? When he thought of Mother Nan's squalid abode, the strings of rabbit-skins, the stacks of bottles, the pitiful eyes of half-starved Tommy, the bruises on his little white shoulders, he felt a lump rise in his throat.

No, no; he would be an unmitigated fool if he suffered his widely-opened eyes to be dazzled by grace, pluck, and beauty. If the Balmaines were eccentric, even to madness, the Gordons could be *dour.*

The severe lesson he had received at Rosamond's hands was a lesson for life. How the county would stare when they were told that he had a wife in their midst! He had not the moral courage to fire such a powder-mill. Of course, had she loved him it would have

been different. She would have lived with Tommy in the old house at Horton, and then he would have found her and brought her back into the world, to take her place as Lady Airdrie; instead of which he had come by accident upon a miserable, ill, and gutter child, and, subsequently, the beautiful and wealthy Miss Balmaine.

"But," pleaded his heart, "how could you expect a poor girl to live alone and wait in hopeless silence, without word or sign, for years? How was *she* to know that you had been cast away on an island out of the reach of ships? How was she to know that you were alive, and that every throb of your heart on that storm-beaten prison was for Rosamond?"

"Could she not have waited?" he asked himself, passionately. "When one is but eighteen, what are four or five years? The woman in 'Enoch Arden' waited seven. The sea *does* give up its dead sometimes."

"Yes," pleaded the other voice, "but Annie Arden was ten years older than Rosamond. She was a village matron. She had children, she had friends. Now, Rosamond was married secretly. She was young, timid, and inexperienced. You must make allowance for eighteen instead of twenty-eight."

"Still, eighteen forgot me and her infant. There are no allowances to be made for that," said Ronald, sternly, in answer to his inward pleader. "Of course in *time* it must all come out, it will have to be made public on account of Tommy's birth; but I shall stave off that announcement as long as possible. 'Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.'"

These were a few of the thoughts that flashed through Lord Airdrie's mind, as he drove up the avenue to Balmaine Court.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"MRS. BRICE is not at home, but I believe the young ladies are in the drawing-room," returned a young footman, in reply to an inquiring groom. And in another minute he was leading the way across a great resounding stone-flagged hall, and, throwing open a door, announced "Lord Airdrie."

As the latter advanced into the apartment, he only observed one occupant—Miss Balmaine, who was lounging on a Chesterfield sofa, which stood in a pleasant bay window. Beside her was placed a tea-table, and she was in the act of feeding a Gordon setter with bread-and-butter.

"I am afraid that John has deluded you," she said, offering her hand with a smile, "for I am the only member of the family at home."

To which her visitor replied, "Well, John merely spoke of you in the plural—like a royal personage."

"Rob Roy and I are having tea together. May I give you some?"

"Thank you," he said, taking a seat facing the sofa.

"Milk and sugar?"

"No sugar"—receiving his cup.

"You must never tell my mother that you discovered Roy here," she continued gaily. "He is not a drawing-room dog. I only smuggle him into the house when there is no one at home."

"He appears to take to the house very kindly,"

remarked Lord Airdrie, gazing at Roy, who, with his chin resting on the tea-table, was admiring a seed-cake with languishing eyes.

"Yes. In his youth he was a house dog, and 'on revient toujours à ses premiers amours.'"

"Do you believe that?" he asked, with a quick glance.

"No"—looking straight at him,—"I don't believe in what are called 'premiers amours' at *all*. How is Tommy?"

"Nearly quite himself, thank you. He sent you a number of messages—and a kiss. I am taking him away for a change."

"I am glad to hear it. He must be dull, poor child, in that great rambling house, with no companions."

"He plays with the coachman's boys."

"The future Lord Airdrie playing in the stables!" she exclaimed, with mock horror. "If this is known he will be cut by all the society children in the county."

"He has not been accustomed to society children," he answered rather grimly. "He does not frequent the stables, and sometimes he amuses himself with *me*."

"He is too young to appreciate a man's condescension. Now is the time that he wants a lady, to pet him, and take him on her lap and sing to him, and tell him stories. His nurse, I am sure, is an excellent woman, but she is not quite the same thing as—as——"

"As a mother. No," said her companion, hastily concluding her sentence.

He looked over at Rosamond as she sat on the sofa, with all the notorious advantage of having her back to the light. Her hat and gloves lay beside her, but she still wore a sable-trimmed blue-cloth coat. The recent run in the park had given her a brilliant colour, and

loosened little stray curls about her well-shaped head. Much should be forgiven to one who was so supremely lovely. Where within the kingdom would he find a more beautiful girl than his own wife—the wife whom he had married on a foggy November morning, five years ago? He glanced at her again, and that glance was all but fatal. The desire to tell her was becoming ungovernable. What madness had prompted him to see her alone, and throw himself into the very arms of a temptation from which he had just opened a door of escape? He felt that the frail screen of his reserve was threatened with destruction. He must and would speak. He put down his cup—it was rattling in the saucer—and said "Rosamond;" but his tone was so low and husky, that it was inaudible.

Rosamond did not hear her name, and little did she guess at the passions that were waging a terrible conflict in the breast of the man who had just placed his tea-cup so carefully on the little table. Her thoughts were bent on him too, and she tried to frame some airy little sentence that would throw a light upon his future matrimonial intentions. He certainly had evinced a taste for Amy's society—that is, for *him*, who usually held aloof from women and talked to men, and who never danced, paid compliments, or played croquet. Perhaps Amy had not been so far wrong, after all? Perhaps he had now come to put his fate to the touch, and to insure her good offices. He looked—she glanced at him swiftly—unusually grave to-day. He had something on his mind. He appeared to be fighting with some emotion, some fierce mental agitation; but, whatever the emotion — possibly he was thinking of his dead wife—it soon passed away. He had once more

grasped the reins of reason and self-command. He took up his tea-cup, and drank off its contents. Then, as he set it down, he said, with a comprehensive glance—

"I suppose these are the portraits of the Balmaine family?"

"Yes" (Madam Balmaine's plunder had been restored), "some of them are thought to be rather good," said Rosamond, rising. "Do you care for pictures?"

"Yes, I do; especially portraits by Lely, Vandyck, Reynolds, and Gainsborough; but I think Romney is my favourite."

"There is a very fine Romney in the library—if you would care to look at it?"

"Thank you, I should. I like this picture of the girl with the yellow scarf and serious, wide-open eyes."

"So do I. I unearthed her from the lumber-room, and had her brought down, and reinstated."

"Why? Was she in disgrace?"

"Yes, in shocking disgrace. She was a certain Molly Balmaine, who made a run-away match with her brother's tutor. Wasn't it wicked of her?"

"A run-away match?" he repeated slowly.

"Yes. Her name was scratched out of the family Bible, and out of her father's will, and her picture was removed from this room, and sent up to the rats in the garrets."

"In short, she was made to furnish an awful example to the family. I suppose it had a good effect? There was never another Gretna Green affair, I presume?" he reiterated.

"Well, yes, there *was*," answered Miss Balmaine—"though not exactly to Gretna Green."

"Indeed! When did that occur?"

"I'm afraid I cannot give you any particulars," she answered, rather stiffly.

"And pray, what became of pretty Molly Balmaine?"

"She died young—and probably it was as well, for no doubt it saved the poor girl from many hardships."

"I gather, then, that these imprudent love-matches have not Miss Balmaine's sympathy?"

"Would not you like to see the Romney?" was her irrelevant remark. "It will soon be quite dark."

"Yes, thank you. I have always heard a great deal of the Balmaine pictures," he added, as they walked side by side through an ante-room and a long corridor, and finally into the library.

"Once upon a time they were all taken out of these rooms, and stored—I may say stacked—in an old house at Horton. When my grandmother left the Court, she took all the pictures with her."

"What kind of a place is Horton?—rather out of the way, is it not?"

"Out of the way? Out of the world! It is like going back one hundred years to live there."

"How do you mean?"

"The houses are three or four hundred years old, and the people seem to match them in their ideas. The place is surrounded by miles of pastures and shingle; indeed, half the parish consists of beach, the other half reclaimed marshes covered with flocks of sheep."

"I suppose you never go there?"

"Oh yes, occasionally. I go and spend a few days in the old Manor House and run wild."

"All alone?"

"No. I take a person with me who was grandmamma's maid; and we live in a corner of the Manor."

"Then you are attached to this outlandish spot?"

"Yes and no. For many reasons I detest it; and yet it draws me back. I suppose every one has a sort of tenderness for the place where they were young. I am a marsh-bred girl. I like to roam about the Marshes; they are beautiful to *me*. This is the Romney," she said, now coming to a full stop before a remarkably fine example of that master—an officer in peruke and scarlet coat, with his ruffled hand upon his sword. "My great-great-grandfather."

"A handsome man! And what a fine pose! How well the hand is done! and the unobtrusive green curtain."

"Yes. He is rather an arrogant-looking old gentleman, is he not?"

"He is. No doubt Romney painted that for twenty-five pounds, and now, I suppose, it would be considered cheap at four or five thousand."

"Yes; his fame has come to him rather late in the day. (Fame is to many like the Spanish fleets—too late, or never.")

"Here is a fine picture"—walking over to another portrait—that of a lady in an old-fashioned habit, leaning on a horse's neck. "Why, it is your grandmother—Madam Balmaine!"

"It is," answered the young lady. "But how on earth did *you* recognize her? You have never been in this room before."

"No"—greatly nonplussed for the moment—"but I have heard of her fox-hunting feats and her scarlet coat, and I just made a shot—a capital shot too."

"Even as quite an old lady she used to ride," continued Rosamond. "I remember her riding about the Marshes on an old bay horse, and she always wore a bonnet."

"This girl with the muff is like *you*, Miss Balmaine," he remarked as he moved on, and stood before another.

"So I am told, and I detest her bland, self-satisfied air. Imagine a low body, bare arms, and a muff the size of a pillow! She married an Italian nobleman."

"And was not disinherited?"

"No; although she changed her religion, and cut all her relations. I cannot remember her name, but she is always called 'the princess.' My grandmother did not approve of her, and kept her picture with its face to the wall, and with the word 'Turncoat' scrawled on the back."

"Your grandmother must have been a most original old woman."

"She was considered rather eccentric. They say that I am like her, and that I have her knack of asking unexpected questions. I would like to ask you a question, Lord Airdrie, if you would not think me too inquisitive?"

"Ask what you please, even unto the half of my secrets. What is it?" he inquired, in a bantering voice.

"Perhaps you may be angry, and think that it is none of my business," she continued.

They were standing once more before the Romney.

"I am sure I shan't think that," he returned in a low tone.

"Well, it is merely this. Every one about here keeps saying to one another, 'Why does not Lord Airdrie marry again?' I am the only one who ventures to boldly bell the cat? *Why* don't you?" she added, pausing, and surveying him with a pair of beautiful searching eyes.

This was indeed a startling question! The companion became grave, and seemed unable to find an immediate answer.

This hesitation was easily interpreted by Rosamond, who said—

"Of course, it would be painful to you—I suppose it is always so; but it cannot do her any harm"—drawing her fur tie round her neck with both hands—"and, indeed, they say that the greatest compliment a man can pay a first wife, is to take a second."

"Would you like it, supposing you were a first wife?"

"How do you mean? I'm afraid you must supply me with ideas; my imagination is not my strong point."

"I mean that if you were dying, would you care to know that your husband was likely to put another woman in your place?"

"I am sure I should not mind. Why should I condemn him to a solitary life? And I don't believe in cruel step-mothers—for instance, I am quite positive that no one could be unkind to Tommy."

"No?"—with a grim, contemptuous smile. "And so you think that I ought to marry again?"

"Yes—for Tommy's sake."

"And am I to sacrifice my dearest and most sacred feelings in the interest of a child—to replace what can never be replaced?"

"If you had a sister, or even an aunt, who could live with you," she ventured, in a hesitating manner.

"I have neither sisters nor aunt; but I am profoundly grateful to Miss Balmaine for taking such interest in my affairs."

"It is not you or your affairs that interest me in the smallest degree," she answered haughtily, stung by the veiled sarcasm in his tone. "I was merely thinking of Tommy; he seems so forlorn in that great house."

"Do you suppose that I could find any one to marry me?"

"Yours is the devil's pet sin, Lord Airdrie; the pride that apes humility. You know as well as I do that there is scarcely a girl in the country who would not say 'yes' if you asked her."

"And you—what would you say if I asked *you?*" he inquired abruptly.

"I should say 'no'," she returned with a laugh, and without the smallest confusion in look or manner.

"No? But you told me this instant that there was not a girl in the neighbourhood but would say 'yes.' How can you contradict yourself in the next breath?"

"I"—placing her hand on her throat, and he remarked that she wore a cheap little silver ring on her wedding finger—"I"—with a faint smile—"am the exception which proves the rule."

"Oh! your woman's wit is too subtle for me! Seriously, putting my feelings aside—as you think it unnecessary to study them under the circumstances—could you not strain a point, and fulfil your own advice and the duty you so plainly impressed upon me, and become Tommy's step-mother? He is very fond of you. You appear to be fond of him. You say that I *ought* to marry for his sake; and there is the whole matter in your hands!"—making a gesture as if he were bestowing some gift or responsibility upon her.

For an answer, she turned away and walked to the nearest window, where she stood with her eyes fixed upon the park. At last she said—

"There are plenty of other girls, and better girls, who would be happy to fill the post!"

"But why not you? Come, Miss Balmaine! At least you will give me an answer."

"Well, then, you shall have an answer. There is an incident in my life. I—I have a—a—past—which I can never forget."

"You hinted as much before; but I am prepared to forget it. I understand, that he is a dead man—out of mind?"

"Yes—dead to me—and often out of mind."

"What would you do if he were to reappear?"

"He never will; he goes about under another name—probably—he—is—married."

She spoke so slowly and reluctantly, that the words appeared to ooze from her lips.

"And you have suffered?"

"I have," she answered with unexpected passion, "from all the worst agony that can torture or wear out a heart."

"Well,"—after a considerable silence—"I will take the risk of everything. May I hope that you will say 'yes'?"

She shook her head.

"Do not be so hasty. Reflect! You will be Lady Airdrie. The Airdrie diamonds are renowned. You will be Tommy's constant companion. You shall be your own mistress—and no questions asked."

"I am perfectly serious," she answered. "Pray do not think that your title or diamonds weigh a feather with me. Were you a prince of the blood, and had you the wealth of the Rothschilds, had I a heart to give—which I have not, for mine is dead—I could never be your wife," concluded Rosamond, excitedly, her words now coming thick and fast, her agitation carrying her

to the bounds of eloquence, her cheeks scarlet, her head thrown slightly back. As she stood in the window, she unconsciously made a more beautiful picture than any in the room.

"And why? What is your *real* reason, supposing that I am prepared to adopt your past, and can do without your heart?"

"For an excellent reason, that nothing could vanquish; because"—catching her breath—"you remind me of him. Your face sometimes brings his before me. It is strange, this resemblance. He had no grand relations—at least, he never named them"—now speaking without excitement, and as if talking to herself. "I don't know why I should tell you things that I never breathe to a soul, scarcely to myself; unless it is, as I have already told you, that you hypnotize me, and drag my secrets from me. I have gratuitously placed myself in your power."

"Your confidences shall be most scrupulously respected, Miss Balmaine."

"On your honour? Then, give me your hand upon it."

In answer to this appeal he stretched out his hand, and she laid her cool fingers in it for a second. He did not retain them, but dropped them as if they scorched him, and placed his own behind his back.

Meanwhile Mrs. Brice and Amy had returned, and hearing that Lord Airdrie was in the drawing-room, bustled into that apartment, only to find the remains of a seed cake on the floor and a Gordon setter stretched upon the sofa fast asleep. They hastened into the anteroom, the corridor, the library, and seeing two figures in a distant window, the elder lady called out in her most affected voice—

"My dearest Rosamond, what *are* you doing here? Do you know that your dreadful dog is asleep on the best sofa in the drawing-room, after gobbling up all the cake? Oh, Lord Airdrie, this *is* a most charming surprise!"

"We have come in here to look at the family portraits, and especially to see this fine Romney," explained Lord Airdrie, with amazing self-possession.

"Is it not rather dark for seeing pictures?" inquired Amy, with a little spiteful laugh. She could not believe her own eyes, or she would have vowed that as she entered the library Lord Airdrie was holding Rosamond's hand.

After a few conventional remarks Lord Airdrie dexterously extricated himself from the situation, got himself out of the house and into his dog-cart. Miss Balmaine, for her part, had escaped the instant her mother had appeared upon the scene.

* * * * *

"What in the world were you and Lord Airdrie talking about, Rosamond?" inquired Amy, as she burst into her room just before dinner. "I could scarcely believe my own eyes; he appeared to be haranguing you, and—did I not dream it?—or *was* he holding your hand?"

"Appearances are frequently deceitful," answered Rosamond, who had dispensed with her maid, and was fastening some flowers into her dress with a couple of safety-pins. "Why should he hold my hand? Is he given to holding ladies' hands?"

"I must confess that he is *not;* but, Rosamond, you had a splendid opportunity. Did you sound him? Did he mention *me?*"

"No, and he gave me most decidedly to understand that with respect to you, or any girl, his intentions are strictly honourable, but not matrimonial."

"Oh!"

"Did he speak of her—I mean his late wife?"

"No."

"I suppose he is one of those rare cases of constancy that you read about in novels, but very seldom see."

"Tell me all about your visit, and what you think of Captain Robinson Smith. Is he the *rara avis* his fond sisters have led us to expect?"

"He is charming—far more so than I could have believed possible—rather a flirt; but we got on together."

"I see—birds of a feather! Then, you are already consoled. 'Light come, light go,' is your motto, and perhaps you might have a worse one, such as 'All, or none;' 'Seeing is believing;' 'Faithful unto death.' Come along now; you need not be smiling at yourself in the glass. I suppose he is coming over to lunch to-morrow, and you are going to show him the prize Airedale?"

"Rosamond, I declare you are a witch! and there is the second gong."

CHAPTER XXIX.

CUBBING was a thing of the past, the hunting season in Sandshire had commenced in good earnest, and there were no more constant followers than Colonel Brice and Miss Balmaine, or, properly speaking, Miss Balmaine, who followed under the charge of Sir Everard Germaine, and bewitched him by feats in the hunting-field, which recalled the legends of Madam Balmaine; it was evident that Miss Rosamond was a chip of the old block! Colonel Brice's performances were restricted to escorting his step-daughter to the cover side, riding a fat, elderly cob (not unlike himself), listening to the talk of younger men, following by roads and lanes, and going remarkably straight and well in glowing descriptions of his own performances, after dinner. No; this sort of thing, which Rosamond was so keen about, was too much for his figure and his nerves. Even in his young days he had not been a very forward man with the station Bobbery pack—a pack consisting of a couple of Rampur hounds, a greyhound, a domesticated pariah, and a dozen of fox-terriers. The going at home was rather different from the open plains and three-foot nullahs. Mrs. Crosse, *née* Miss Brice, had recently arrived upon a visit to her father, bringing with her a large stock of brilliant toilettes (and a corresponding amount of self-assurance), her screaming laugh and sharp

tongue. She accompanied Mrs. Brice to the meets in the family landau, and it gave her severe thrills of jealousy to note, what a popular and important personage Rosamond had become. As she sat her hunter, she was surrounded by a crowd of smart men; dowagers in carriages beamed upon her; at home, silly little Amy Jebb adored her, and even Colonel and Mrs. Brice listened to Rosamond's remarks with astounding attention, and few interruptions. She dressed with great taste, had her own horses, pony cart, and maid; in short, Miss Balmaine of the Court had emerged from her dull, grub-like existence, and burst upon the world as a beautiful butterfly.

"*How* I should like to give her wings a pinch!" said Mrs. Crosse to herself, as she eyed her enviously at a large dinner-party, when her animation and her radiant beauty were the cynosure of many eyes; and on another occasion, at a large "at home" in a big country house, where a string band and two lady palmisters made the dull, dark afternoon pass like a flash. Here she noted that every one seemed to have a word (or to wish to have a word) with Miss Balmaine, who, in her velvet coat and sables, and dainty little toque, was looking brilliantly handsome. First, there was the rector, about something for the parish; next, Sir E. Germaine, with a word about a horse; then the Countess of Killybegs, with a question about a stall at a bazaar. In short, Rosamond Balmaine, who ought by rights to be living in sackcloth and ashes, was basking in the fullest blaze of social success, whilst she, who was a respectable person, against whom no whisper of scandal had ever been breathed, was, despite her thirty-guinea gown and Parisian head-gear, sitting in a corner—along with

a dowdy old frump, in a huge frilled cape—absolutely overlooked!

It was more than Mrs. Crosse could stand. As she gazed over at Rosamond—the centre of a merry group, diamonds glittering at her throat, the little feathers on her toque waving jauntily above her head—envy, hatred, and malice became uncontrollable. She therefore proceeded to give the butterfly wings their first little pinch.

"Isn't she lovely?" remarked her companion, following her eyes.

"Very nice-looking indeed."

"She is so popular, too!"

"Yes?"—in a tone of rather cool incredulity.

"And in spite of her good looks, and her fortune, and her position, there never was a more humble-minded girl"—waxing enthusiastic. "She is adored by the poor people, and—and—by Lady Passingham, and——"

"Apparently, by all the young men!" added Mrs. Crosse, in a tart voice.

"Yes; but she won't have anything to say to one of them. Is it not odd?"

"Not so *very* odd as it may seem. She had a severe lesson when she was in her teens."

"Oh, then, you know all about her?"

"Yes. She is a distant connection of mine, and I know *all* about her"—with deadly significance.

The other lady pursed up her mouth, and raised her eyebrows.

"Was there anything—— Do I understand you?" She paused, and looked the picture of solemn interrogation.

"The subject died a natural death about four years

ago. Pray don't ask me to *explain*. Every family has its own little washing to do."

"Oh, dear me, dear me!" cried Miss Hutt, in a flutter of horror, wagging both hands, and shaking her frilled cape in a manner that gave her the appearance of an old Friesland hen.

"I must ask you not to allow my little hint to go any further."

"But I don't understand your little hint!"

"Then so much the better"—rising—"I was so afraid that I had said too much; and my husband always tells me that I am so dreadfully transparent."

Miss Hutt sat with folded hands, looking at her helplessly, and Lizzie glanced again at Rosamond. She was sitting next to Lady Passingham in a throne-like carved chair in the corridor; one man was holding her gloves, another her coffee-cup, whilst two more hovered near.

She looked so triumphant and so pretty, Mrs. Crosse was filled with an irresistible impulse to trample and to gore. She was leaving in two days' time—it might be "Après moi le déluge." *She* did not care; the deluge would not affect her, only the girl in the blue-velvet toque, who was holding up her long white throat, and talking to Lord Passingham.

"I think it is only kind to give you a hint," said Mrs. Crosse, leaning over and speaking to her companion in a confidential whisper. "It is all right for men and even for married women to know her; but if you have daughters, one can't be too particular—you *understand*."

"Was there a scandal?" demanded Miss Hutt, who was known as the "Arminster Gazette;" but Mrs.

Crosse merely put her finger on her lip and rustled gracefully away.

As they drove home together, she and Mrs. Brice and Rosamond, Mrs. Crosse was in extraordinarily high spirits, and assured her companions that she had enjoyed herself enormously.

"I was afraid you might find it dull sitting next old Miss Hutt," said Rosamond; "for our local scandal could not interest you."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, I'm sure *you* don't want to hear of the fights at Dorcas Meetings, or how much Mrs. Panter pays for her boots, or how Mrs. Lord had three cooks in a week."

"Well, good heavens, I should think not."

"So I went into the tea-room to hunt for General Gibbon, whom I was sure you had known in India; but when I came back you were gone."

"Yes, I suppose I was. You appear to be a great friend at Passingham; quite *l'enfant de la maison?*"

"Oh no; but Lucy Passingham and I were at school together, and Lady Passingham's mother and grandmamma were cousins. Indeed, most people down here are connected. You have to be very cautious what you say to your next-door neighbour."

"How I should hate to be always on my P's and Q's."

"My dear, *you* never were on your P's and Q's," said Mrs. Brice, "so you don't know what it's like—what scrapes you have got into in your young days."

"Well, if it comes to that, mamma, I'm not so very old," cried Mrs. Crosse, who was thirty-three.

"No; and you may possibly be in plenty more, you hope, eh?"

"I just say out what I think, when it's the truth, and I see no harm in it."

"The naked truth sometimes startles people, don't you find it so?" suggested Rosamond.

"Well, but why should it?"

"It was not so much the truth, that startled *your* friends, Lizzie, as your habit of telling funny stories to the wrong people—sometimes to the very heroes or heroines themselves—and your loud remarks in mixed society. You were very often in hot water, you know, my dear."

"Well, if I was, no one ever could say of *me*, 'still waters run *deep*.'" And she looked across at Rosamond with a curious smile.

"Do tell me, dear, where did you get that perfectly divine toque?"

* * * * * *

Having given the butterfly wings one pinch—a pinch out-of-doors, Mrs. Crosse decided that she would administer another within; in short, she would drop a hint to little Amy.

Amy was cowering over the fire with a novel. She hated winter. She neither hunted nor skated, and she was subject to chilblains and colds. This day she was feeling severely depressed. She had been alone all afternoon, and hailed with joy the arrival of her aunt and Mrs. Crosse, when they entered on their return from a hunt luncheon, bringing a current of conversation and cold air.

Mrs. Brice speedily left the drawing-room, pleading letters. But Mrs. Crosse threw off her gloves, and settled down in a roomy armchair to enjoy tea and crumpets.

"And what have you done with Rosamond?" asked Amy, with a yawn.

"Oh, she is galloping away at the very tail of the pack. When I see Rosamond as she is now, I declare to you that I don't know her."

"Why not? She is not changed in any way."

"That's all *you* know about it, my dear little simpleton." Then, after an expressive pause, and in a lower voice, "Have you never heard anything about Rosamond?"

"Nothing but what was good."

"I suppose *you* think that butter would not melt in her mouth?"—her eyes now blinking and twinkling. "Miss Rosamond has a past, and I know it."

"I don't wish to hear it, if you do."

"Oh, very well; but some day every one will hear it. And you can go about with cotton-wool in your ears, can you?"

"Oh, Lizzie, is it very, very—ah, *very* bad?" asked Amy, with round eyes. Her ravenous curiosity had speedily swallowed up her loyalty.

"Ahem—*very*. But I don't wish to make mischief; you and she are such friends."

"But are not you? I'm sure Rosamond has been doing all sorts of things to please you—asking people to the house she thought you would like, lending your maid and her patterns, driving you here and there."

"Oh yes; Rosamond is very good-natured. It seems so funny to me to see her taking the lead in every way, for when we last met, she had quite a back seat;—and five years ago she was in the deepest disgrace."

"Rosamond?"

"Yes, Rosamond. It's all over now. But the Balmaines, for all their blue blood, are a wild lot. I shall never forget the first time I saw her. She was brought up by Maggs."

"I hate Maggs; she is neither maid nor housekeeper —just that detestable nuisance, an old servant, who has nothing to do but pry and make nasty remarks."

"She was brought up to London by Maggs to meet us at the Metropole. Just a thin, awkward, badly dressed girl, that looked as if she was afraid of her own shadow. She had been living quite in the wilds, and was supposed to be as innocent as one of the lambs on the Marshes."

"Well?"—breathlessly.

"She had, it appears, gone off on the sly with some good-for-nothing young nobleman. My brother saw them in Paris, and recognized Rosamond the instant he set eyes on her again. He told, and there was a most awful row."

"And the young man?"

"Disappeared—was never seen or heard of. She actually declared that she was *married*. I believe he could have been prosecuted, for she was a minor. However, she had no 'lines,' as they call them, and it was all hushed up. Rosamond and Maggs were despatched to the old Manor House at Horton, and were away for months. Mrs. Brice went down there too, in answer to a telegram. After a long time, Rosamond came back. She looked perfectly awful, as if she was losing her wits. She did nothing but mope. And then we all went abroad, and she seemed thankful to hide her head."

"Is that all?"

"All? I think it is pretty well. Rosamond has the

family propensity to do mad things. It's my own belief that she ran away from Horton with a married man, found out her mistake, returned home, and repented in dust and ashes."

"Good gracious! Lizzie, I wish you had not told me all this! I shall never, never be able to look Rosamond in the face again. She will see that I know."

"Not she. Every one will know some day. These things always leak out. But I hope you will not let what I've told you go any further. *I* don't wish to be the first to cast a stone."

"No; nor I. Poor Rosamond! Now I understand some things—why she is so cold and distant with men, and why she wears a shabby little locket. Well, although you have given me a fearful shock, all the same, I shall always be fond of Rosamond."

"Oh yes, of course. And so shall I," added Mrs. Crosse, in a patronizing tone, rising and picking up her muff. "Indeed, some day I hope she will be my sister-in-law. You see, Teddy knows; and he would hold his tongue. He is coming home from America immediately. I really think it is time for him to settle down. And of course he must marry money."

So saying, she collected her gloves, furs and veil, and sailed out of the room.

In two days' time, Mrs. Crosse had taken leave of Balmaine Court and her connections, and gone north. But the evil she had done lived after her; her hint was as a drop of poison in a clear cup of water. The news spread with the rapidity of a fire in oil works, and lost nothing in its travels. Matrons began to give one another whispered hints: "The Balmaines were peculiar;" "The girl had been left too long alone with her

imbecile grandmother;" "There was *always* a wild strain in the blood;" "A runaway, hushed up," wives told their husbands; and people cast their minds back, and recollected that, even after Mrs. Brice's return, her daughter had not appeared in her society for months. Where was she? Who was the man? Perhaps it would be as well if Daisy and Tottie did not ride with Miss Balmaine so often; the dear girls could make some excuse. And there was no occasion to ask her over for the fancy ball; nothing definite had been settled. Invitations to the Court were politely declined. The whole of society had been seething with the scandal (though what it actually was, no one could say. No particulars had transpired; but looks, shrugs, hints—each played their part with remarkable success. The story, whatever it was, had come direct from a relative of the Balmaines) before the truth dawned on Rosamond; girls, her friends, gave her a cool little nod, and seemed anxious to get away; their mothers were stiff, and looked like judges, and no longer called her "Rosamond;" invitations, instead of being overwhelming, became fitful. Even Amy was changed. Amy had become petulant and patronizing, and she noticed that she often found her watching her with wide-open, wondering eyes. Colonel and Mrs. Brice, too, began to see that there was something amiss—the genial social atmosphere had changed from the temperature of a hothouse to that of a black frost. Yes; all the maids and matrons appeared to give the once popular Rosamond cold looks and the cold shoulder. Why?

CHAPTER XXX.

"A ROLLING stone gathers no moss," and Mr. Brice had been figuratively rolling about the world for nearly three years, and generally going from bad to worse. Latterly he had been in the States, where his fortunes fluctuated according to what he termed his "luck." He was living more or less upon his wits, and it required an individual of a much stouter mental calibre to exist on such wits in New York and elsewhere. At times he would be established at some fashionable hotel, clothed in good raiment and fine linen, smoking prime cigars, quaffing breakers of champagne, and roistering with the best. Then he would sink to a flannel shirt, a short pipe, and a situation as boots or barman; lower still, to downright squalor and semi-starvation, from which a timely remittance from his father would deliver him. Teddy was always sanguine, and periodically announced that "his fortune was about to be made," through some remarkable investment or discovery, or that "he was on the eve of marrying an heiress." But his only investments were in drinking saloons and gambling hells. When in the shadiest of company he played faro, Monte, and stud poker.

For nearly a year he drifted about the States; from New York to Chicago, from Chicago to the hot springs in Kansas, Kansas to New Orleans, and so back again

to New York—a by-word for drinking, lying, and meanness.

Gambling was his sole pursuit. He had acquired several smart tricks with cards, and had lately consorted with two very clever associates. Teddy looked such an inane and brainless Britisher that he served as a fairly good accomplice and decoy, and he and his partners were ready to play anything, from the shell game with women, to Monte with men.

One evening they were playing poker with a smooth-faced young fellow from the West, who was losing heavily, also a rich Australian, who believed that he was seeing "life." Piles of notes were on the table, when, quite unexpectedly, the smooth-faced one pulled out a revolver and said, "Hands up or I shoot!" In another moment he had turned out their pockets, remarking, "The first who moves his arms is a dead man!" He next proceeded to rake up all the winnings on the table, and, collecting the whole pile before their agonized eyes, crammed all into the breast of his coat, and still covering them with his shooting-iron, backed, bowing profoundly, towards the door, and so escaped, carrying off every dollar they possessed, as well as a handsome sum belonging to the now enlightened traveller.

And recently Mr. Brice's career had been rather too adventurous and exciting (so he declared); his health had given way, and he decided that he would try change of air and scene, and return to the dear old country. He found the voyage profitable (won a large sum at poker), and arrived at Balmaine Court with certain spoils in the shape of a complete new outfit and portmanteau, and a considerable amount of ready cash, which he had the prudence to bank. Colonel Brice augured well from his

son's outward appearance, and received him with effusion; Mrs. Brice with civility, and Miss Balmaine with very distant politeness. In the governor and the old lady he found but little alteration, but Rosamond was greatly changed. When he had last seen her she was a timid schoolgirl; but here was a remarkably handsome, self-possessed young woman, who held her head as high as a duchess, and, to use his own expression, appeared to "boss the whole show!"

Balmaine Court and her fortune were in the hands of trustees until her twenty-fifth birthday, but she appeared to do pretty well as she pleased even *now!* She had two hunters, two smart black cobs—"Day and Martin;" she dressed well, and carried herself with an air of great independence. Evidently she and her people had forgotten a certain little episode in her past, but *he* had a better memory. He believed himself to be irresistible, and made overtures of amity, which were disdainfully repulsed. His suggestion that they should "let bygones be bygones" was received with a haughty stare. She ignored his existence in a manner that penetrated even his thick-skinned vanity, and he declared to himself, with oaths, that he would pay her out—and marry her.

As far as his relatives were able to judge, Mr. Brice had brought nothing back with him from America beyond a marvellous knack of compounding mixed drinks, a burning desire to initiate strangers into the mysteries of stud poker, and a few strange expressions. He never appeared before lunch-time, but then he was prepared to sit up till breakfast hour the following day.

"I say," he said one evening to Rosamond, when he found her alone, "why are you always so beastly stand-off with me? I'm your mother's step-son, you know—

same family. 'Birds in their little nests agree,' and all that, and why should not you and I?"

"You and I have nothing in common, Mr. Brice; but I have no desire to quarrel with you, or any one."

"No, you'd better not quarrel with *me*. As for nothing in common, it seems to me we have a good deal. What about your friend—the fellow with the dark moustache? You know very well that I could give you away if I liked."

Dead silence.

"Now, look you here; you and I have got to be good friends—a sort of mutual defence and admiration league—see? If you are real nice to me, I'll be real nice to you; and not a soul shall ever suspect what a naughty little girl you have been. Come, is that a bargain? Say?"

"Mr. Brice, I make no bargains," she answered in a voice that shook; "and if you wish to remain on the most distant terms with me, you will never speak to me in this way again."

"Oh, now, don't look at me like that!" he cried with a laugh. "Why, I declare, I'm just scared cold! Now, see here; I'm a poor man, and I can't afford lofty sentiments. Once upon a time you put yourself in my power, and that's got to cost you some money. You give me, say, one thousand pounds right away, and I'll stand by you through thick and thin. See?"

At the word "thick" Rosamond was at the door; at the syllable "thin" she had vanished.

Mr. Brice walked deliberately to the window and looked out. This park belonged to Rosamond; this mansion, a most comfortable abode; and that Balmaine cellar was by no means exhausted; the stable was full

of sound horses, the house of well-trained servants; and it was all kept up on Rosamond's coin, and would at no distant date be his own exclusive property if he played his cards well. For he held Rosamond in the hollow of his hand, and his price was herself—or her good name. Women were so sensitive about their reputations, that it seemed to him that his success was a foregone conclusion. Yes, give her time, and the heiress would bestow herself and her fortune on Teddy Brice, Esq., whose property consisted of a dozen pairs of boots, a couple of portmanteaus full of clothes, several highly flavoured French novels, five hundred pounds, and his own ugly and unwholesome-looking person.

When in India Colonel Brice had vainly endeavoured to launch this "ne'er do weel." He had been brought up at home, out of touch with *home*, and had no plain-speaking father or critical kindred to point out to him his many defects. As a boy he swaggered as a rich man's son, whilst his impecunious parent groaned at the heavy family remittances and exchanges; but Teddy never spared either his father or his funds. He had failed for the army, had attempted unsuccessfully to enter the opium department, as well as the Burmese police; and Mr. Teddy would probably have started life as a guard on the G.I.P., or other Indian line, had not his stepmother been also the mother of a wealthy daughter. He was aware of the fact that Miss Rosamond did not care for him. More than that, as he mentally expressed it, she hated him like poison since he had "split" on her; but she feared him—fear is as powerful an instrument as love. He had the young woman under his thumb, and if she did not say "Yes,"

he would show her up, by heaven he would; and she would never dare to show her nose in decent society, much less live in that neighbourhood. But he must give her time. And as he was comfortable, and they did him well at the Court, he could afford to wait. He stood with his hands in his pockets. His round bullet head and large ears defined against the light, his pale goggle eyes peering out from his mean little face, he was the very picture of a selfish, cunning little cad, such as John Leech would have immortalized.

Lord Airdrie had returned home, having got together a capital string of hunters. He had not as yet seen anything of the family at the Court, as he had been busy setting in order his house as well as his stables.

He walked over to afternoon service on Sunday. The congregation was thin, and he only observed one worshipper in the Court pew—Miss Balmaine.

As soon as the service was at an end, he saw her going down the walk which led to a private gate and short cut home across the park. She did not, as usual, loiter to exchange a few words with her friends, and he hastened to overtake her.

"How do you do, Miss Balmaine?" he said. "I hope you are not going to cut me."

"Oh no"—turning round as she spoke. "When did you return?"

"Only two days ago."

"And how is Tommy?"

"Very fit indeed, thank you."

"And did you have a good time?"

"Yes, first rate. And you?"

"No, I have not been having at all a good time."

"How is that?"

"Oh, I can't exactly explain." A pause. And she added, irrelevantly, "Mr. Brice, Colonel Brice's son, has come home."

"First time I knew he had one."

"Oh yes—and a married daughter. Mr. Brice has been in America for several years."

"And returned full of Yankee notions?"

"He has some absurd notions, at any rate."

They had now come to the wicket, and a full stop.

"What a lovely wreath!" she exclaimed. "It has been laid on that grave since I went into church. What a nice custom it is, this laying flowers on graves!"

"Yes, even the poor don't forget—see?"—pointing to a child's grave, on which stood three jam-pots full of chrysanthemums, and a great pie-dish crammed with holly and ivy. Beside it was another tiny grave, new and perfectly bare.

Rosamond stood for a moment beside it, and then suddenly unfastened a great bunch of violets which she wore, and laid them tenderly upon the mould.

"Why?" asked her companion. "Why that particular grave?"

"Because—because——" she stammered. "Well, then, for the sake of another grave, upon which no one ever lays a flower," she concluded, two tears shining in her eyes.

"Oh, a child's grave?" he added expressively.

She looked at him, the blood mounting slowly from her chin to her brow, and bowed her head in assent, and there was a pause of several seconds. Then he went on, in a totally different voice—

"Well, and what is the latest news in this part of the world? Any broken necks—or hearts?"

"I really cannot tell you. I have not been going out much lately."

"Nonsense! That is something quite out of the common. How can society exist without Miss Balmaine?"

"I am afraid that society is not particularly anxious to have Miss Balmaine's company."

"Why so?"

"You have only recently come home, or you might have been able to tell *me*. I am the last person to hear, whatever I might feel." And she bit her lip as she recalled how two of her once dearest friends had just passed her by with a frozen stare.

"What is it all about?"

"There is no such thing as burying one's past," she exclaimed, with a gesture of despair. "Mine has been disinterred, and is presumably stalking about the country in seven-leagued boots."

"By whom has it been raised?"

"I cannot say. Has no gossip come to *your* ears? I dare say if you will go to the county club, you may be able to gather some information."

"No need to do that," he said gravely, "for I know everything about you."

"You know everything?" she repeated. "What do you mean? How can *you* know?"

He looked her straight in the face as he answered, without the least hesitation—

"How I came by the information is immaterial. I know of your lover, the engineer fellow, who gave you the dog, and of how you used to meet him on the Marshes. I know of your marriage——"

She took a step backwards, and laid her hand upon the gate for support.

"I am aware that a child was born to you, and immediately made over to a woman called Mother Nan —an abominable baby farmer——"

"No," she interrupted, sharply; "that is not true. He died when he was three days old."

"Are you sure?"

"Quite sure," she answered, now white as a sheet, but returning his gaze unflinchingly. "As sure as that I stand here. I was aware that some kind of disgraceful story was circulating in the neighbourhood about me, but I never dreamt that it was *this!* Even my own connections have refrained from hinting at it. It has apparently remained for you—a stranger—to collect the scandal the instant you return, and come hurrying to assure me that you know 'everything.'"

"Miss Balmaine, I have not listened to gossip; I am the only person that knows what I have told you. You must allow me to speak," he protested.

"No, you have said enough; I shall *not* allow you to speak. I forbid you ever to speak to me again," she retorted passionately. "I can easily understand your discussing my private affairs with other *men*, but why you should open the subject with me is amazing. I don't know how you dared to do it."

Before he could realize that she was going, she had quickly opened the gate (which led into the Balmaine estate), passed through and locked it behind her, leaving her late companion bereft of the power of speech.

He watched her as she proceeded briskly along the narrow path—watched as if he had been moonstruck, until she vanished into a plantation, and was lost to sight.

Then he removed his hat and wiped his forehead with his handkerchief, and exclaimed—

"Well, I am beginning to see light at last. The other was not like her. I'll take my oath they told her the child was dead. Now, what am I to do? Where do *I* come in? Those lawyers always said that I should make a confounded mess of the whole business, and they were right. Of course, I shall claim her at once. It will never do to write; the affair is now at such an acute crisis that a personal interview is essential. They are sure to come out with the hounds to-morrow, and I'll manage to have a word with Rosamond alone."

CHAPTER XXXI.

LORD AIRDRIE now found himself in an unexpectedly awkward dilemma, and was completely at a loss to know what to do. The more he turned over the subject in his brain, the more puzzled he became; his mind was tossed about in a storm of doubt. Rosamond had unconsciously cleared herself, and forbidden him ever to address her again; she looked as if she meant it too! How was he to approach and declare himself? Who was he to tell? Colonel Brice? Mrs. Brice? The latter was probably at the bottom of the whole thing—had worked upon a naturally timid and credulous girl, and hardened her heart by robbing her of her baby. What punishment should be meted out to a woman, who had not scrupled to tamper with her daughter's good name, quench all hope, and bruise her heart? These thoughts were busy in his brain as Lord Airdrie trotted along, on a fine bay hunter, *en route* to a popular meet. There was a strong gathering—one slight figure on a chestnut he recognized at once, with a burly personage in attendance—they met in a narrow lane where the hounds and all the field were going down to draw a cover some way off. To Colonel Brice's beaming salutation he replied by at once raising his hat and riding up beside them. He looked at Rosamond interrogatively, Colonel Brice having made room for him to ride between them; his

very boot touched the off-side of her saddle, as he said in an off-hand way—

"Charming morning, is it not?"

Would she keep her word? would she speak?

For some seconds he received no reply. The fair, clear-cut profile was resolutely turned away. Then she moved her head, and gave him one glance of haughty amazement, her horse made a sudden plunge forward, and she joined Sir Everard Germaine, who was just in front of him, and in another moment was galloping along with him down to the cover, leaving Colonel Brice and Lord Airdrie alone.

"You must not mind her," said the former, apologetically. He had a profound respect for the titled man in the scarlet coat who was riding beside him, with his lips rather curiously compressed beneath his dark moustache. "None of us mind Rosamond; she has the real Balmaine temper, and is in one of her dark moods to-day; a run with the hounds will make her all right."

"I suppose she has never had any idea of marrying?" inquired the other, looking straight into Colonel Brice's little black eyes.

"Marrying! Bless my soul! Why, she is barely three and twenty," was the evasive reply.

"She is hard to please, apparently?"

"Yes, very. The fact is," dropping his voice confidentially, "she had a little affair when she was in her teens, that has given her a bad opinion of mankind. The fellow behaved like a scoundrel. She has had scores of offers since, but it has always been—no."

"So it would seem. Hullo! he is in it!" alluding to the fox, and putting his horse into a gallop. There he

goes, with the prospect of a good run—a good horse under him, and young blood in his veins. He has cast all care behind him for the present, and was over a stiff thorn hedge before Colonel Brice had realized that he was gone.

Rosamond was well away with the hounds too. Ronald saw her blue habit speeding across a field to the left. She evidently knew what she was about, and no mistake. She came out cleverly under a tree, and was soon in the same field as himself. They took the next fence together, side by side.

On they went, now in the same line, now diverging, he leading of the two, up hill and down dale, over brooks, hedges, stiles, till the fox was run into within a hundred yards of a friendly cover in a plantation, just eight miles from where he had been viewed away.

The brush was handed to the only lady up. It was by rights Lord Airdrie's property, for he had been the only man with the hounds, when they had run into the fox, and he had saved it; but he did not venture to present it in person to the fair Diana, who remained at some little distance aloof, on her panting chestnut, whose distended nostrils and extended forelegs testified that he had had enough of it, if she had not.

Presently Colonel Brice arrived—a little late, and bearing traces of briars across his ruddy face.

"Good run, capital spin, Airdrie. I say, come and dine with us this evening, quite without ceremony, and have a chat about our friends in town."

The bidden guest glanced over at Miss Balmaine, now surrounded by a mob of Nimrods, made up his mind at once to say "yes," and accepted without hesitation.

"I suppose you are not coming our way?" said Colonel Brice, affably.

"No; it's pretty early yet; we're safe for a run from here, and I've got a fellow somewhere about with my second horse; so good-bye for the present," trotting away. No chance of a private word with Rosamond. He would write.

On his road home, Colonel Brice informed his step-daughter of his invitation, and *who* it was that was coming to take "pot luck." She listened in perfect silence, made no remark of any kind, but she inwardly resolved to lay the case before her mother, and to utterly and firmly decline to meet Lord Airdrie on *any* terms whatever.

When they had reached home, she changed her muddy habit, swallowed a cup of hot tea, and then went (a most unusual proceeding) to her mother's room, and knocked at her door with her knuckles.

"Come in, come in," said a languid voice; and the open door revealed Mrs. Brice lying on a sofa, novel in hand, in a rose-coloured dressing-gown, what she called "resting for dinner."

"Oh, really!" in a tone of amazement. "Is it *you*, Rosamond? So you have come home. What is it?" rather peevishly.

"I wanted to speak to you in private, mother," closing the door, and walking over, "so I came here."

"Oh dear me! I *do* detest these private talks and these tragedy airs, but sit down—sit down."

"You cannot say I've troubled you much with either, mother," said Rosamond, gravely, looking at her companion, with clear, appealing eyes.

"And what is it now? You make my head ache!"

"I wish to speak to you about Lord Airdrie."

"Lord Airdrie!" springing up very eagerly, and letting the novel slide to the floor, with a bang. "Has he proposed for you?"

"No, indeed," she rejoined, "and what I wish to say is *this*, that I never intend to meet him, or speak to him again!"

"Never speak to him again! Rubbish, nonsense!" ejaculated Mrs. Brice angrily.

"It is no nonsense! I will not endure his society!" rising and confronting her mother. "I met him after church yesterday. He knows my whole wretched story."

"*What?*" in a tone of dismay.

"Yes, everything; my marriage, my trip to Paris."

"Great heavens! How did he hear this?"

"And as a last straw, he asked me about my baby," speaking with a very white face. "He did not seem to think it was dead. He appeared to believe that I had deserted it!"

A sudden curious expression in her mother's face made her pause, and look at her in amazement.

Could it be that he had any grounds for his idea? Oh, could it? She asked herself this question with a heart that was almost bursting with the vague, mere, half-defined hope.

"He mentioned the woman, who had care of a child—a Mother Nan," she continued aloud, still keeping her eyes steadily fixed on her companion, whose hands were fidgeting uneasily with her lace frills, and whose face was actually of a dull lemon colour. "Oh, mother, mother!" she cried, suddenly throwing herself on her knees beside the sofa, "tell me if it is true; tell me if you put it out to nurse, and told me it was dead! Tell me,"—seizing her hand and covering it with kisses—"and

I will forgive everything—anything, to know that it is alive!" she cried passionately; "anything—all I have in the world—if I may only see it!"

"What nonsense, Rosamond!"—wrenching away her hand. "Are you mad, or beside yourself?" cried Mrs. Brice, querulously. "You are certainly crazy!"—giving her a little push as she spoke. "Your child is dead; and a good thing, too! You should be ashamed to speak of it!"

At this acrid rebuke, Rosamond, still kneeling, covered her face with her hands, and kept silence for some moments. Then rising, she said slowly—

"I beg your pardon, mother, for thinking you would have deceived me. I was sure he was wrong. I was sure—however angry you might be—you never, never would have robbed me of all I had!"—in a choked voice.

"All you had indeed! I hate to hear you!"—impatiently. "You are quite imbecile on the subject, and cling to what another girl would shrink from with horror!"

"But, after all, I was married, and in a church," she said, with some spirit.

"We have heard that so often"—contemptuously—"but where is the church? and where is the man? Vague assertions go for nothing! I believe you were married, but probably under assumed names, and it's more than likely he had a wife living. If he had not, why should he not claim you? You are rich, young, and very pretty. But men are wicked enough for anything!"—closing her eyes as she spoke, and leaning back on her pillow. "I suppose you would recognize him if you saw him, would you, though it is years ago?"—without opening her eyes.

"I should, of course; and do you know who he strongly resembles? Lord Airdrie!"

"Lord Airdrie!"—scornfully. "How likely a mere nobody, with no good blood in his veins, would resemble a man, who bears the stamp of what, I think, is even more important than looks—race in every feature!"

"Whoever Lord Airdrie is, he knows my secret, and he is mean enough to boast to me of his information. How he learnt all he does know, I cannot tell—Maggs must have been bribed!"

"Maggs is beyond a bribe. If he talks of you to other people, what will become of you, Rosamond?"

"I don't know, and don't much care," she answered recklessly, now pacing the room with hasty footsteps. "Life is too hard for me; everywhere I turn I meet with some rude blow. One thing, however, is positively certain, that nothing will induce me to speak to Lord Airdrie, to meet him, to sit in the room with him again. After all, what did I do?"—declaiming with uplifted hand. "I was a foolish, impressionable girl—a mere child, indeed. I married, as I believed, the man I loved, as many other girls do, and I was deceived, as many other girls are. But ours is not the sin; we are sinned against. Why should public opinion point the finger of scorn at us, the victims? If ever a man in the world seemed true, it was Ronald."

"Ah!" said her mother, with a sneer, "you had had such wide experience. Seventeen knows so much of the world and men——"

"I see it is no use talking to you, mother; you can never understand"—gazing at her with reproachful eyes. "If Ronald had been drowned at sea, I could have borne it better, but he landed in Australia——"

"Or pretended he did," put in Mrs. Brice, sharply.

"Yes, if he were dead it would not seem so bad, though perhaps I should not say so; but to know that he is alive, is somewhere, and has wholly forgotten me, is the sharpest sting of all. Forgive me; you must remember that you are the only person in the world to whom I can open my heart on this subject, and find the blessed relief of speech, and you will do me the justice to admit that it is not *often* I break the silence."

"No, thank goodness!" said her companion, fervently.

"I'm not coming down to dinner to-night," proceeded her daughter, calmly. "I shall have tea in the morning-room. I do not choose to meet Lord Airdrie, and you need not make any excuse for me. He will understand that I mean to keep my word. Society has dropped me—and I intend to drop Lord Airdrie."

So saying, Miss Balmaine walked over to the door, opened it, nodded impressively to her mother—who lay helplessly staring at her—and went out.

CHAPTER XXXII.

AFTER a two-mile jog trot, drawing a favourite cover blank, an unexpected "find" in some outlying gorse, and a short burst, the December afternoon began to close in, and Lord Airdrie found himself jogging homewards along the dusky, muddy lanes in company with several men. They carefully discussed, yard by yard, the early run of the day; where the hounds had hit off the scent; where So-and-so's horse had been pumped out; and what their own respective feats had been.

Suddenly there was a word about Miss Balmaine, and then a remark which caused her husband to start violently. It was evident that the lady had recently been placed under the pitiless lens of the social microscope. By all accounts it had transpired (somewhat late in the day) that Miss Balmaine had sown some remarkably wild oats, and was really no better than a second Mrs. Tanqueray or a notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith—a fair Rosamond indeed! He listened in a dazed condition in the semi-darkness to a long-backed old squire on a long-backed old hunter declaring that "though, personally, he liked Miss Balmaine, and admired her more than any young woman he knew, yet he had forbidden his daughters to speak to her; and that in the opinion of his wife, and other experienced matrons, there was nothing for her to do but leave the country. She could never live it down."

"Live what down?" asked Lord Airdrie, suddenly.

"There were blank spaces in her life not accounted for. Now facts have leaked out. As a girl in her teens she ran off with some married man. One must really draw the line somewhere."

He gathered that the rector's family, two or three girls, and all the young men, as well as the Germaines, were still her staunch adherents; but that she had been left out of the Passinghams' dance, and it was more than doubtful if she could receive an invitation for the hunt ball.

He made up his mind to claim her instantly. This was a phase of the question which he had never taken into consideration; he would proclaim Rosamond as his wife, —even if she refused to speak to him. She must stand forth at once as Lady Airdrie; and what a commotion there would be! To the utter amazement of his three companions, a deep harsh voice came suddenly out of the darkness, saying—

"I shouldn't advise you fellows to spread this tale about Miss Balmaine. There is not one word of truth in it. I can vouch for her with my life. I have known her since she was seventeen." He would have added more, but that it seemed a subversion of affairs to announce that Rosamond was his wife, before she was aware of that fact herself; however, he was only postponing the intelligence for twenty-four hours.

* * * * * *

Lord Airdrie duly arrived in unimpeachable evening dress, and was received by Mrs. Brice, Colonel Brice, and Miss Jebb only. Mr. Brice was dining in Arminster with a brother reprobate, where, at a third-rate hotel, he amazed the company with his conversation, and card-tricks. Miss Balmaine remained entrenched in her own

apartment. They had a most excellent and appetizing little dinner, and no mention whatever was made of the absentees.

The guest talked a great deal of the afternoon's run to Colonel Brice, and who were with it, and who were not. He discussed the forthcoming ball with the vivacious Amy, but did not converse much with his hostess.

Amy sat exactly opposite him, and mentally declared that really, on second thoughts, he was better looking than Alec Smith-Robinson. His features were more regular, and he had splendid teeth, not that he showed them frequently, or indulged in many smiles.

He looked so friendly, too, as if he had something to tell her. Could it be that, after all, *she* was the attraction that drew him to the Court? Why not? said triumphant conceit; more unlikely things had happened. She beamed her best, her most warranted and witching smiles, across the dessert. Never had he been so agreeable, never had he exerted himself so much. His conversational powers were quite brilliant, and Amy felt truly reluctant when her hostess gave the fatal signal for departure.

She longed for the drawing-room door to open, and the two gentlemen to join them; but they would be sure to sit talking for ever so long over that hateful, stupid hunting; and she sipped her tea discontentedly, whilst Mrs. Brice indulged in forty winks, which she subsequently denied.

At length they did come. The door was flung open at last. This time it was neither coals nor coffee. Amy, in answer to Lord Airdrie's petition, sang two sparkling little songs, whilst he rested his elbows on the piano and watched her.

Yes, she had made a good impression at last, and she was the more confirmed in this rapturous idea, by his leaning over and saying to her, in a very low voice, accompanied by a thrilling glance—

"Miss Jebb, will you do me a favour?"

"Certainly, of course, with pleasure!" she stammered.

"You won't think me rude or impertinent if I ask you to leave me alone with Colonel and Mrs. Brice for half an hour, will you?"

"Oh no!" becoming red as a poppy.

He was going to ask for her hand. She saw it all, rising from the piano with a palpitating heart.

"Just slip out quietly, not as if you were going on purpose, and you can't think how much obliged I shall be to you. You need not go yet, you know, it's too soon; she isn't half awake. Come over and show me those Italian photographs"—walking toward the table.

The photographs duly discussed, Amy seized a moment when she was not taking part in the conversation, and stole away, full of high hopes. She had barely closed the door, when Ronald, resolved to make the most of his time, said—

"I wish particularly to speak to you, Colonel Brice and Mrs. Brice, alone, on a subject concerning Miss Balmaine and myself."

"He is going to propose," thought both these good people, ecstatically, and beamed to their uttermost, to show that they were prepared to lend him a most favourable ear.

Mrs. Brice stroked down her satin lap, and Colonel Brice stuck his thumb in the armhole of his waistcoat, and looked benignant.

Lord Airdrie remained standing, with his back to the fire, between them both.

"I dare say you wonder what I can possibly have to say to you in private," he continued, looking from one to the other, "and with regard to Miss Balmaine?"

"Oh dear! I'm sure we can guess," returned Mrs. Brice, smiling at him with extraordinary significance. "There is usually but one topic that a young man wishes to lay before a young lady's father and mother, alone."

"I think I ought to tell you that I am going to make you acquainted with some facts that will surprise you very much," said Lord Airdrie. "You probably never knew that Miss Balmaine and I were connected?"

"You and Rosamond!" cried Mrs. Brice, in a tone of great surprise. "And how? You are not related to me, nor are you—that I know, at least—related to the Balmaines"—looking at him very sharply.

"Still, you will see that I am no stranger to the family, Mrs. Brice, and you will be prepared to hear that"—speaking very deliberately—"I know all Miss Balmaine's past. There is nothing that I do not know."

On hearing this Mrs. Brice became extremely red and uncomfortable, and fidgeted about in her chair, dropped her hand screen, picked it up, and said nothing.

"I allude to her life when she left school, her meeting with Ronald Gordon."

"Don't speak of it! Don't name the scoundrel!" cried Colonel Brice, jumping to his feet with immense animation. "I only wish I had him here now, I would not leave a whole bone in his body!"—squaring himself, with a very bellicose expression.

"No!" remarked Lord Airdrie, with a wonderful *sang froid*, and slightly lifting his eyebrows. "Then I think it will be best to tell you, before you say anything further, *that I am Ronald Gordon!*"

If a bombshell had exploded on the hearthrug, it would not have caused more dismay than this extraordinary announcement. Colonel Brice recoiled, and gasped like a fish who had just been landed from his natural element—his mouth was open, his eyes literally looked as if they were about to fall out of his head, so round and prominent had they become; and as to Mrs. Brice, her attitude was simply that of petrified incredulity.

"What! what did you say?" said Colonel Brice, at last. "I must have misunderstood you."

"I said that I was Ronald Gordon. I am Rosamond's husband, and she is, and has been for the last year, not Mrs. Gordon, much less Miss Balmaine—but Lady Airdrie."

"What does it all mean?" demanded Colonel Brice, excitedly. "Are you drunk or dreaming, or are you quite out of your mind?"

"It requires some explanation certainly, and you shall have it now at once"—looking from one to the other impressively. "I was an engineer, as you have heard, sent down to survey Horton Marshes for the new line of rail. I there accidentally met Miss Balmaine, fell in love with her, proposed for her, and married her. She was doubtful of her own strength of mind, during my enforced absence in Australia. She found that you would not hear of our engagement. She was totally ignorant of the fact that she was her grandmother's heiress, and so was I, and at my suggestion we were married before I sailed, to make assurance doubly sure.

We were married at St. Andrew's, Paddington, on a foggy morning, and went straight to Paris for our honeymoon. To make everything clear to you, Colonel and Mrs. Brice, here is the original copy of our marriage certificate"—holding out, as he spoke, a much-folded and weather-stained-looking piece of paper. "You can verify it in the church registry."

Mrs. Brice received it in a dazed, dreamy kind of way, and scarcely looked at the names, Ronald Gordon, bachelor, and Rosamond Balmaine, spinster. Her mind was still reeling from the shock she had just received. She had made away with, and consigned to the gutter, the eldest, only son of this young nobleman, the heir to Airdrie Castle. But *who* was Tommy?

"You see," proceeded Ronald, in a cool, decisive tone, "we were as legally married as you were yourself, Mrs. Brice. I went to Melbourne on important business. I was obliged to go for the sake of money. I was poor, and necessity knows no law. I meant to make a home for Rosamond, and send for her, or fetch her, ere the year was over. I went direct from one steamer to another, never stopping; went on board a steamer for New Zealand the very day we got into Melbourne. I did not wish to waste an hour."

"Quite so, quite so," assented Colonel Brice, impatiently; "and what next?"

"We met with terrible weather; we were driven out of our course and completely wrecked on a barren island, out of the track of ships, and there, half-starving, living on seaweed, fish, and gannets' eggs, we dragged out—those that survived—a miserable existence for nearly three years. We were at last taken off by an American whaler, and I returned, as it were, from the

sea and from the dead, to England, after a long absence. I then discovered that fortune, to make up to me for all my ill-luck, had bestowed upon me a new name, plenty of money, and plenty of friends, who never heard and never cared about the poor struggling engineer, Ronald Gordon. My first business was to find my wife—no easy matter. I traced her to your London house—you had left; to Horton—she was not there either; but I discovered," looking keenly at Mrs. Brice, "some one else. A little ragged urchin took my fancy, and I his." Mrs. Brice's face twitched. "I brought him to the inn, and gave him a meal, and quite accidentally heard his story—whispered, of course. He was Miss Balmaine's boy, born at Horton, abandoned by his mother, who had left him with a drunken old harridan, at the cost of a few shillings a week, and had latterly entirely forgotten his existence." Mrs. Brice now held her screen between her face and the eyes of her son-in-law. "I need scarcely say with what feelings I listened to this. I adopted Tommy on the spot, and I looked upon his mother as the most unnatural and wicked of women. I was resolved to bury Ronald Gordon in Lord Airdrie, at least for a time, for my former acquaintances in most cases failed to recognize me.

"Four years of the life I led are as much as twenty of a life at home, for changing a man's looks. I was aged and sunburnt, and wore a beard. My disguise was complete. The first time we met, quite accidentally, Rosamond did not know me. Of course I knew her; though the fashionable, distinguished-looking, worldly Miss Balmaine was as different from Rosamond Gordon as dark from light.

"I kept aloof from her as much as possible. Her

treatment of Tommy, her repudiation of her marriage, her apparent total forgetfulness of me, hardened my heart; and yet she had ever, in spite of herself, an extraordinary fascination for me.

"I knew I should have to acknowledge her some day, for Tommy's sake, and deferred that day for many reasons. The great talk and nine days' wonder it would give rise to, was one; and the dread of placing myself in her power, knowing her disposition, her absolute lack of heart, was another. I have since discovered—only last evening—that I wronged her"—looking intently and significantly at Mrs. Brice; "that she was not an unnatural mother; that the loss of her child, whom she supposed to be dead, had frozen her heart; that her mind, easily wrought upon, was moulded to their own purposes, by other people."

"Oh, Lord Airdrie!" cried Mrs. Brice, hastily jumping to her feet, her face working with agitation, her hands clasped in an agony of supplication, "I did it all for the best, I did, on my honour and word, and for the sake of her good name. She had no proofs; you had disappeared. It seemed such an unusual, such a miserable story. What could I do?"

"You might have left her her baby," he said sternly. "Only by the mere accident of my going to Horton, I doubt if he would be alive now—half-starved, beaten, and bruised, as he was when I found him. You might have given *me* the benefit of the doubt; you might have said that I was dead, and let her at least consider herself a widow. You might have had the registers of the London churches searched; *that* was easy enough. You might have done all these things; but the truth was, you did not wish to recognize the fact of Rosamond's

probable marriage with a pauper, such as I was then."

Mrs. Brice made no reply. She had collapsed once more into her armchair, and was forcing some crocodile tears—tears which were very destructive to the pearl powder on her face; for Mrs. Brice, having been a beauty, still fondly clung to the delusion that she had a complexion, and just tinged her sallow cheeks, and powdered them, to give them the corresponding hues.

"Begad," cried Colonel Brice, staring hard at his newly discovered son-in-law, "this beats everything I ever heard in my life—everything!" stuffing his hands violently into his pockets. "Rosamond's runaway lover a lord! Rosamond's baby, that I thought was dead, Tommy! She does not know it yet, I suppose?"

"No; and I don't know how I am to tell her, or who is to tell her," said the other gravely.

"Fancy Rosamond being Lady Airdrie!" exclaimed Colonel Brice, in a tone of repressed triumph. "What a sell for all the girls who have been setting their caps at you, eh, Airdrie! I don't know *how* the county will take it"—grinning.

"They had better be told the truth, I suppose; that is always the best plan. But it is rather premature talking of the public, when the principal party concerned is, so far, in ignorance of the whole matter."

"And she has taken the greatest dislike to you," said Mrs. Brice, with a little sniff of vicious triumph, drying her eyes as she spoke.

"You are perfectly right, my dear madam—she abhors Lord Airdrie; but the question remains to be seen, will she abhor Ronald Gordon?"

"She will never believe that you and he are the same."

"She would if I had a chance of speaking to her, but she declared that she would never open her lips to me again; and this morning, as you saw"—looking at Colonel Brice—"she administered the most pointed and unmistakable cut direct, and she declines to meet me this evening."

"Why is she so bitter against you? What have you been saying to her to put her back up?" inquired Colonel Brice, inquisitively.

"I showed her that I knew all her life, and she imagines me to be some relation of Ronald Gordon's. She sees, very naturally, a very strong likeness between us; and matters are now at a dead-lock. Until yesterday I was angry with Rosamond. I resented her treatment of Tommy. I was not inclined to make it up with her—at least, not often. Now that she is entirely cleared, she, by a horrible perversity of circumstances, will have nothing to do with *me;* the boot is on the other foot."

"Quite so, quite so. There is nothing for it but to leave it to time," said Colonel Brice. "Time and chance, and it will all come right."

"Oh!"—impatiently. "It is all very fine for you to talk of time and chance in this matter-of-fact way, Colonel Brice; but you forget that Rosamond and I have been separated for five years. That is a tolerably good slice out of one's youth. I'm not inclined to put myself in the hands of time, though I suppose I must wait. I can't very well force myself into her society and say, Here I am, I'm your husband, I'm Ronald Gordon!"

"She would not believe you, you think?"

"With her present feelings towards me—bitter resent-

ment and deep animosity—I am sure she would not. I tell you and Mrs. Brice, and Miss Jebb had better be told, but just at present, I think the secret had better go no further."

"As you please," acquiesced Colonel Brice, frankly. "What do you say, Mrs. B.?"

"Yes, I think, as Rosamond herself does not know, we had better all keep our own counsel, at least for the present."

Thus the matter concluded, and a few minutes later, Lord Airdrie's dog-cart was announced; and promising to drop in whenever he felt inclined, and shaking hands with his host and hostess, he wrapped himself up in a thick frieze ulster, lit his cigar, and drove himself rapidly back to Queen's Gift.

"I've given them something to think of," he said to himself—"something out of the common. By Jove! their faces were a caution! I thought that Mrs. Brice was going to faint, and he to have an apoplectic seizure."

Meanwhile his late listeners were sitting at either side of the fire, blankly staring at one another. This was the calm before the storm, and when it burst out, a perfect hurricane of mutual recrimination set in. "How could you leave the child to starve, Mrs. B.? You heard it was dead? I don't believe you," said her husband, fiercely.

"Well, I'm no worse, no, not so bad as you," she rejoined furiously. "It was you that declared that the young man was a scoundrel, and never would listen to the idea of her being married. You ought to have had the registers looked over, as he said, and I hinted the same thing to you myself dozens of times."

"All very well to say 'ought to' now. A nice kettle of fish you have made of it, Mrs. B.!"

"I! Oh, of course!"—scornfully. "Put it all down to me; that's so like you."

At this crisis the door opened, and Amy came gliding in, very expectant and very anxious, glancing round with a rather disappointed air.

"Well, where is he?" she asked at last. "Has he gone? Surely not already; it's only half-past ten."

"Yes, my dear, he is gone," said Colonel Brice, standing with his coat-tails under his arms, back to the fire.

"We have had a most extraordinary piece of intelligence from him"—eying her as he spoke. "I'll give you ten guesses. You'll never find out, clever little girl as you are."

"I think I know," said Amy, in a low voice, a smile she could not repress struggling about the corners of her mouth, as she stood in the middle of the room, twisting her bangles, her eyes cast bashfully on the floor.

"Bless us and save us!" exclaimed Colonel Brice. "How the mischief could you know? You are not wiser than your elders? You don't mean to say you think"—speaking with slow and unwonted emphasis—"that he has been coming here after you? Ha, ha, ha! Well, you may put that idea out of your head, little Miss Amy"—chuckling to himself.

"Then," with a gasp, "it's—it's Rosamond," faltered Miss Jebb—"it's Rosamond he has been thinking of all the time; and he always seemed to hate her, and anyway she abhors *him!*"—with tearful triumph flashing out of her wet, indignant eyes. "Does he want to marry Rosamond?" she reiterated angrily.

"No, my dear, he does *not*. That little ceremony took

place some time ago—say, five years. In fact, not to keep you any longer than need be on tenter-hooks, he came here this evening expressly to introduce himself to us as Ronald Gordon—Lord Airdrie—and"—with a pompous flourish of his hand—"*our son-in-law.*"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

AMY stood in the middle of the room for some moments, as motionless as a statue, and then, with a sudden awakening, as it were, from a kind of mental stupor, she threw up both her hands with a gesture of scornful repudiation, and said—

"What nonsense, Colonel Brice! I do not believe a word of it; he is making fun of you."

"Not at all—anything but that"—very decidedly.

"But how can it be? Don't you think that Rosamond would have known him?"

"She did not—she does not. He was cast away for years on an island. He is, as he says, sunburnt, aged, and altered; his name, his very status in society, is changed. How could she know?"

"Well," said Amy, "I'm sure I should have recognized him if he had been *my* husband. But—but whose is the child?"—as if she had propounded an unanswerable problem.

"His, of course."

"Yes. We always understood that; but who is the child's mother?"

"Why, Rosamond, of course."

"I never knew"—becoming very red—"that—that Rosamond had had a child."

"Well, now you know it, there's no harm in it. It

seems she was married all right and tight enough to this fellow she ran away with, but we never believed that till now; and Mrs. B., over there, told Rosamond the baby was dead. I don't know how you are going to square *that* with her now, Mrs. B., eh?"—nodding imperiously at his wife, who sat in a stricken attitude, gazing from one to the other, with a face of unmistakable uneasiness.

This little wretch, the Honourable Thomas, was actually her grandson!

How strange it seemed! Lord Airdrie's son, *her* grandson! She could hardly realize it. And how was this to be told to Rosamond? Who was to inform her that she was the mother of a living child, a sturdy son, with noble blood in his veins—she who believed her baby lay under the long grass in an out-of-the-way corner in Horton churchyard? She, her mother, must tell her, must admit that she had lied, must eat her words in dust and ashes. And no one will be surprised to hear that she shrank instinctively from the task.

Amy Jebb, with flushed face, unusually bright eyes, still remained standing in the middle of the room, in an attitude that spoke volumes of bewilderment and incredulity.

"I cannot believe it," she exclaimed at last. "It seems altogether too ridiculous, too improbable; it's like a kind of fairy tale! To hear all of a sudden that Rosamond is married, and has a child of four years old! Why, she's younger than I am!"

"What has that to say to it?" exclaimed Colonel Brice, with angry impatience.

"Oh, nothing, of course; but I can't get over it! Married to Lord Airdrie, and not knowing he is her

husband, nor Tommy her son! Are you sure Lord Airdrie is in his right senses? The whole thing sounds as if it were made up out of his head. Perhaps he is a little touched"—putting her hand to her curls with a gesture of illustration.

"Touched! Stuff and nonsense!" cried Colonel Brice, irascibly. "No more than I am. It is you who are not in your right senses, to say such things"—very rudely.

"And Rosamond is Lady Airdrie!" she ejaculated. "Lady Airdrie! I can't imagine it."

"She will carry her honours well," said Colonel Brice, now prepared at once to worship the rising sun; "she will grace a coronet."

"But how is she to be told?" put in Mrs. Brice, querulously.

"Oh, he will have no difficulty in managing that part of the business!" returned her husband, with a chuckle.

"But she won't speak to him. She has taken the most extraordinary aversion to him. She would not even come down to-night, as you know," returned Amy, rather triumphantly. "It won't be as *easy* to speak to her as he thinks."

"And it's enough to turn her head," put in her mother. "Fancy a girl hearing in one breath, that she has a husband and a child and a coronet awaiting her!"

"It's curious how she always took to Tommy," continued Mrs. Brice, reflectively. "It looked like human nature seeing further than we see."

"We have been as blind as moles, Mrs. Brice," said her husband, "and I don't know how we are to get out

of it, and that's a fact. You were always so infernally positive, and so sure and certain that she was *not* married."

"I!"—in a high key of expostulation. "Pardon me, Colonel Brice, you have made a great mistake. It was you who declared 'she had been deceived by some young scamp'—I quote your own words—'from first to last.' I! That's a good joke. It's all very well to come and lay the blame on me now—it's so like a man. I had nothing to do with that part of the business; it was all you and Ted. Ted said he *knew* the man, and that he was a notorious *roué*."

Leaving the couple to a violent scene of mutual recrimination, which waxed louder and fiercer every minute, Amy left the room, and walked upstairs in a kind of half-dreamy state.

"Rosamond Lady Airdrie—*Lady Airdrie!*" she kept repeating to herself, till she almost mechanically arrived at Lady Airdrie's door, opened it, and went in.

She found her friend sitting in an easy-chair by the fire, her hair streaming down over her shoulders, a book in her hand, whose poor back was not the better of the roaring logs to which it was held in such close vicinity.

"Well, my dear!" cried Rosamond, laying it face downwards, and accosting her visitor with raised brows and a smile, "what ages you've been downstairs! I hope you've had a pleasant evening. *I* have. I am going through this actually, straight off, for the second time, it's so deeply interesting. By-the-by, what's the matter with you? You look as if you had had a knock on the head. Or is it only sleep—gentle sleep?"

"It is," returned the other, sitting down and staring very hard at her friend, and endeavouring in her own

mind to fit her into her new character, but in vain; she was just Rosamond Balmaine.

"What on earth are you staring at? I'm not on fire, Amy"—laughing. "You look as if you saw something on the top of my head"—putting up her hand. "What *is* the matter with you this evening, Amy? Has anything happened downstairs?"

"Happened! How do you mean?"

"Did the dinner meet with an accident, or did Colonel Brice have one of his awful sneezing fits, or was Lord Airdrie too dull, even for a lord?"

"Oh no. I never knew him so entertaining—quite witty and amusing."

"Oh, really! Then he must have been retailing some of the latest scandal. He has a morbid taste for trotting out other people's skeletons."

"What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I say. He has scraped acquaintance with a skeleton that I know of, and paraded it about on Sunday, for which I shall never forgive him."

"How *can* you talk in this awful way of skeletons, Rosamond?"

"Why not? You and I are each skeletons at this very moment. Did you never hear of the gentleman who was so proud of being so well made, that he desired to be buried alone on the top of a hill, in order that at the resurrection he might be *sure* of having his own bones?"

"Certainly, all the Balmaines *are* eccentric, if not wanting a day in the week," Amy exclaimed, with a jerk of her head. "And as it happened, Lord Airdrie was not retailing scandal or trotting out skeletons, as you call it; he was talking of his wife."

"And isn't she a skeleton? Well, well, I mean, isn't she dead, poor soul?"

"No"—staring at Rosamond, and then, no longer able to control herself, Amy went off into a wild peal of hysterical laughter, which shook her slight frame and astounded her companion. When she had recovered somewhat, got her breath and dried her eyes, she rose to depart with unusual precipitation.

"What *is* the matter with you, Amy?" inquired her friend, laying her hand on her arm. "I get wild fits myself, and laugh in the most foolish manner at nothing at all, and I talk nonsense, as I have done to-night; but I've never seen *you* like this before, and you know you have no secrets from me. Has this amazing attack anything to do with Lady Airdrie?"

"Yes, it has," gasped Amy.

"And is she coming here?"

"Yes—she is here."

"Well, *I* shall not make her acquaintance, for one."

"Oh, Rosamond, don't, *don't;* you'll be the death of me!" cried her companion in a choked voice; and with this incomprehensible remark, she wrenched open the door, and fled.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE (to him) humdrum country life at the Court began to pall on Mr. Brice in a very short time. He did not care for "huntin'," or "shootin'," or "fishin'," as he called it. The domestic hearth bored him to death. He was sick of his father's old stories, Mrs. Brice's juvenile airs, and Amy's cackle. And as for Rosamond Balmaine, she represented the proverbial last straw!

All the same, Mr. Brice had fully made up his mind to marry her. His father's "lease" (as he humorously expressed it) of the Balmaine revenues would be out in another couple of years; and in the meanwhile he was resolved to bring the young woman to her bearings, and let her know what her ultimate fate would be. Of course, she might buy him off, but she might find it cheaper in the long run to marry him. She held her head so very high, with her long throat, dark eyes, and scornful mouth. Yes, she might pose as an empress to the county, but he would soon bring her down a peg. Before leaving home he resolved to place his matrimonial affairs on a comfortable footing. He was aware that Rosamond had gone out by the west gate (in fact, he had watched her), and he swallowed down a large glass of curaçoa in order to steady his nerves, and set out in her wake with a fiery "Trichy" in his mouth and a firm determination in his mind, to see Rosamond alone, to

stand none of her airs, and to pave the way to the altar.

She was not hunting to-day—the meet was much too distant, and she and Roy had gone for a stroll on a common not very far off. Amy, whose mind was still entirely disorganized, sat over the fire, with a novel in her hand. She was a chilly little person, and looked pale, shivering, and discontented, and was by no means anxious to take a long *tête-à-tête* walk with Rosamond. She knew that she had no command over that unruly member, her tongue; goodness knows what she might "let out;" discretion was the better part of valour, and duty and inclination, for once, were on the same side: she would remain at home.

Very bright and charming her friend looked, as she stood in the doorway, in her fur cap and coat, and vainly endeavoured to beguile her from the fire.

"You will make a regular old woman of yourself, sitting all day over the coals. You will wither up your complexion, and look as wrinkled as a roasted apple. Run, and put on your boots, and come along."

"No, no," shaking her head, and shivering as she spoke.

It was a bitter day; she had a cold coming on; she had a pain in her ankle. Anyway she refused to budge, and Rosamond and Roy set forth alone. Roy was seven years old now, but just as fond of getting out for a scamper as in those early days when he used to gallop, and whirl, and circle like a dog possessed, over Horton Marshes.

He and his mistress took their way down a short avenue, along a rather muddy road, then over two fields by a bridle-way, and out on a wide, delightfully wild-

looking common, or, more properly speaking, moor, with clumps of furze and heather—some sheep scattered here and there, but no sign of human habitation. A high road ran through it, which Rosamond and Roy avoided, and took a short cut across a pathway leading over the grass. Dearly would Roy have liked to run on among the sheep, and drive them before him, but he knew better: *noblesse oblige.* After a good brisk stretch of two miles over the common, they turned homewards, when, to Rosamond's unmitigated disgust, she beheld Teddy Brice approaching with his usual prancing gait, and a broad smile on his face.

"Hullo, Rosie!" he called out familiarly. "And doth not a meeting like *this* make amends?" he added with would-be wit.

"Where are you going to?" was her abrupt question.

"I just came out for a stroll, and to look for *you.*"

"For me!"—with a scornful smile, as he turned and walked beside her, adapting his pace to her exceedingly rapid walk.

"Yes, and you are not to look so cross and grumpy, my dear girl. I assure you, it is intended as a great compliment."

"A compliment that I can dispense with," she returned rudely.

"Oh no, Rosie, you cannot. Come, now, don't be getting on your high horse with *me.* It's no good—I know too much, eh?"

"You don't know how to behave yourself as a gentleman," she rejoined, with a withering glance; "and, what is more, you never will."

"There you go, there you go, as usual; but *I* don't mind. It's all like water running off a duck's back, as

far as I am concerned. I'll have *my* turn by-and-by" —expressively.

"May I ask what you mean?"—looking at him scornfully.

"You know I admire you awfully, Rosie."

"I wish to goodness you would not call me Rosie," she interrupted passionately. "I won't permit it."

"Ah, I'm treading on delicate ground, am I, eh, Miss Balmaine?"—bringing his face very close to hers. "*That* was the other fellow's pet name for you, eh?"

"Keep away"—fiercely. "Walk on," she added, waving her umbrella imperiously. "I renounce the honour of your escort."

"Come, come now; she must not be cross, must she, Roy?"—addressing the dog in would-be gay, persuasive tones, and walking beside the lady all the same. "You know, 'pon my honour, Rosie, that I admire you awfully; I do indeed. You are the dead image of a ripping pretty girl that does the trapeze business at the——"

"Never mind where. I do not wish to hear who I am like, in your opinion."

"Oh, if you saw her, you would not be so short, I can tell you. She's my style all to nothing, and so are you" —coming nearer.

"That will do! Keep your distance, and let it suffice you to know that you are not *my* style."

"Oh, am I not?"—in an affronted tone. "Well, you are singular, that's one comfort," he added complacently. "I flatter myself that I know *your* style—a dark, hawk-eyed chap, with a black moustache. Ha! ha! ha! Well, we won't fight about looks; it's all the same when people are married—it does not matter a straw. When we are

married a year, it will be all the same to me if you were Venus, or the pig-faced lady."

"When *who* are married?" she inquired sharply.

"You and I, to be sure," was the prompt reply.

"You are rambling in your mind this afternoon, Mr. Brice," said Rosamond, sarcastically.

"No, never saner in my life—never! Why should not we marry?"

"Well, for one very simple but sufficient reason."

"And what is that?"

"That I detest you more than any one in the whole world. I would rather die—you understand that—than ever become Mrs. Edward Brice."

"You will marry me all the same, and I'll tell you why: though I know your history, I'll stretch a point and make you my wife."

"Thank you—in consideration of six thousand a year, is it not?"

"Precisely, my prickly rose. You have got it this time."

"And supposing I say *never?*" she said contemptuously.

"Then I shall have to put on the screw. I will let you know what to expect. I shall"—now speaking very slowly and distinctly—"go among all my men friends, and tell them the true history of Miss Balmaine. I'll tell them *everything*. It will be nuts for lots of people, especially the fellows Miss Balmaine has snubbed. She will be turned out of society—she will be a social pariah. The ice queen, indeed! A pretty take in—chaste as ice—pure as snow! Dear me! dear me! Appearances are deceitful"—shaking his head expressively.

"I told you once before to be gone and do your worst," returned his victim, passionately; "and you took me at my word. You have the same permission *now*. Never, as long as you live, presume to speak to me again; never dare to come under the same roof with me, you meanest creature that ever was called man. Go! I will wait here, till you are out of sight!"—now halting at the edge of the common.

"Leave you! I've not done with you yet, Miss Rose, if I do leave you. I give you a week to think over what I have said; and now, as you look so pretty in a tantrum, before we part, I'm just going to take a kiss"—suddenly seizing her round the waist.

During the high words this pair had been bandying with each other, they were unaware that a horseman was trotting across the common behind them. He had recognized Rosamond at once, and comprehended by her gestures, that she was angrily repudiating something or other. He came closer, and was within forty yards, when he saw the man she was with suddenly put his arm round her waist, and instantly set spurs to his hunter.

But Rosamond was better able to take care of herself now, than in those days in Paris long ago. She twisted herself free from Mr. Brice's hateful embrace in half a second; and, taking a short hold of her umbrella, said, in a voice that shook with passion—

"If you dare to touch me again, I—I—shall kill you!"

An empty threat, of course; but it only needed a glance at her blazing eyes to show that if she lacked the power, she, at any rate, had the *will*.

"What's all this?" said a voice behind her; and,

starting, she beheld her other *bête noire.* This was *too* much! Lord Airdrie had grasped the situation in a glance, and recognized the audacious little cad of the Porte St. Martin Theatre to boot.

The recognition was not mutual, as he sprang to the ground, hunting-crop in hand, and, looking rather dangerous, he said—

"Has this fellow been annoying you, Miss Balmaine?"

"You leave Miss Balmaine and me alone, my fine gentleman," rejoined Teddy, valiantly; but his pale face belied his words. "Just ride on, and mind your own business, if *you* please."

"It is my business to interfere on any lady's behalf when I see her insulted by a cad like you!" said the other, fiercely; "and I feel strongly inclined to break every bone in your miserable little body!"—taking him by the collar as if he were a child.

But here Rosamond interfered, much as she loathed and detested Teddy. Now that she was cooler, she did not wish for the championship of Lord Airdrie.

"But he insulted you, Miss Balmaine?" he demanded, still holding the struggling Teddy by the collar.

"Yes, he did; but let him go. I do not wish for *your* interference"—surveying him with proud, defiant eyes. "Only keep him with you till I get part of the way home," she added, on second thoughts; "that is all I want"—her voice trembling as she spoke—"or ask you to do for me." And without another word she turned, and, vanishing round a corner down a lane, in another moment was lost to sight—and then, to tell the truth, she began to run at the top of her speed.

As her rapid footsteps died away, Lord Airdrie

released his hold on Teddy's collar, and said in a tone of repressed, but furious passion—

"What the devil have you been saying to her, sir?"

"What the devil is it to you?" returned the other, insolently.

"What—have—you been—saying?" now seizing him again, and shaking him backwards and forwards in his grasp like a rat.

"I say, hold on," he shouted, "a great strong chap like you. It's a beastly shame! Hold on," he cried, "and I'll tell you. I—I was doing no harm; I was asking her to marry me, that's all."

"Oh, that's *all*, is it?"—ironically. "Nothing else? And she accepted you with effusion?" he added, with a sneer.

"No"—sullenly—"you know she did not; but she will have to marry me, all the same."

"Oh, indeed; and why?"

"Because I've known her for a long time——" and he paused.

"What a fortunate circumstance for her."

"And because——" with a spiteful glance. "You are Lord Airdrie, ain't you? You are a friend of the family—well, you *ought* to know that Miss Balmaine is a particularly nice young woman."

"Yes, pray proceed; I am all attention"—running the lash of his hunting-whip through his hand, and eying Mr. Brice meditatively.

"No one would marry her but myself. She is a young woman with a history—a past."

"Really! What sort of a history?"

"Well, one that is not exactly suited for the use of schools, as they say, or for private families. She is

called the Ice Queen, and she has just as much right to that name as——"—grinning.

"Stop!" interrupted the other. "If you dare to breathe her name in connection with anything but what is spotless as snow, I'll——"

"Don't be in such a rage for nothing!" cried Teddy Brice, stepping back. "You haven't heard the story. When you have, you won't be so ready with your threats. She was brought up in the country—*quite* the violet in the shade—and when her grandmother died she took up with some young fellow on the sly, ran off to Paris on a spree, had no end of a good time, and returned to the bosom of her family pretending she had been staying with her schoolmistress! This was not all; she had a baby, which has been hustled away somewhere. Oh, she is an uncommonly nice, well-behaved young person!"

"And yet you would marry her, Mr. Brice—you would be good enough to overlook her little deficiencies?"

"I would for certain solid reasons. And now you know the whole story, Lord Airdrie, perhaps you will leave me to manage my own affairs?"

"Oh, certainly"—putting a strong restraint upon himself, and fingering his whip with almost feverish impatience. "And the man she ran away with—what about *him?*"

"Oh, he has never been heard of, of course. He was some swell, a wolf in sheep's clothing"—grinning and winking. "I saw him, and I'd know him again anywhere, if he ever dares to show up."

"You are quite sure of that?"—impressively.

"Sure and certain."

"If he was standing before you, what would you say to him?"

"Say? Oh, I don't know. It's not *my* business; it's Mrs. Brice's or Rosamond's," returned Teddy, evasively.

"Your memory for faces is not so good as you imagine, Mr. Brice," said the other, with a curious expression on his face; "*I was the man.*"

"You, *you!*"—recoiling—"not you! This is some of your humbug. It—it could not have been you!"

"And why not? Look at me well; imagine me without a beard, and looking ten years younger."

"Well, and supposing I can imagine all that"—now plucking up heart—"what then? What have you got to say for yourself, eh? Oh, by George, this will be jam for the governor when he knows it."

"He does know it," returned the other, coolly.

"What! What does he know?"

"That I'm Ronald Gordon, who was lost at sea and cast away on an island; that I am now the owner, most unexpectedly, of the Airdrie estates; and that for more than five years I have been Miss Balmaine's husband."

* * * * *

Mr. Brice gasped at this announcement. He simply could not speak; his tongue had lost the power of expression. He merely stood, and gazed at this stranger, who sternly confronted him, with his horse's bridle over his arm.

"And she doesn't know you!" he exclaimed at last. "What's the meaning of it all? I'm blest if I can make it out."

"She does not recognize me—you are right there; but it is unnecessary to explain matters to *you*, Mr. Brice. Ask your step-mother; she will give you any information

you may require, if your curiosity becomes uncontrollable. I may, however, satisfy your mind on *two* points: one is that Rosamond Gordon, being Lady Airdrie, will never be your wife. The other little item of intelligence is this: that you never—and doubtless you have had many a narrow escape—were so near a sound horsewhipping as you have been to-day; only that she made it a special request, I would have half killed you; and if I ever hear you talking of her—of our"—correcting himself—"affairs, or of annoying her in any way, or thrusting your undesirable company on her, at any time, I will give you ample reason to remember Ronald Airdrie."

And with this emphatic warning, he deliberately remounted his horse, and without another look towards the abject figure of Mr. Brice, he trotted briskly away, and was soon out of sight, leaving Rosamond's tormentor uttering a variety of ejaculations, and feeling as if the world had been suddenly turned upside down.

So she *was* married, after all, and to this real live lord; and yet she did not recognize him as her husband.

"It was more than he could swallow," he told himself forcibly; but at any rate, whatever happened, he was resolved to give the lady a very wide berth in future—to take the advice of that fierce-looking young man—and whether she was Miss Balmaine, Mrs. Gordon, or Lady Airdrie, to leave Rosamond severely alone.

CHAPTER XXXV.

ROSAMOND hurried up the muddy lane, her feet, as it were, winged by fear. She dreaded being followed by Teddy Brice, and she equally dreaded being overtaken by Lord Airdrie.

She was a most unfortunate girl, she told herself. Her past, her whole miserable story, was entirely at the mercy of the two men she had left behind her on the common. If the worst came to the worst, and she was "shown up," as Teddy had threatened, and cast forth from society with pity and disdain, she could cross the seas, and commence another life under another sky. She had but little to tie her to the land of her birth.

Society's pleasures—she had tasted so fully, had experience in every phase, and every form—were beginning to pall. They had never laid hold of her heart; they were merely an anodyne to drown care and memory, and as such they had been partially effectual. It was something to be looked upon as a social queen, to be deferred to and admired. She would not have been human—much less a woman—if she had not had some satisfaction in testing the power of her pretty face, and of enhancing her appearance in charming toilettes. Yes, she liked dress, as all women do; she liked her glass to assure her that she was lovely; she liked dancing,

riding, tennis ; she liked not a few girls, and some men, in a wholly negative fashion. Why should this man—this Lord Airdrie—with a strange odd look of Ronald, come like a bolt from the blue, and spoil her life, such as it was? As long as he was in her vicinity she would know no peace ; and as to Teddy, he was insupportable, he was scarcely human—he was *very* human. She would mildly, but firmly, submit the matter to her mother, and tell her that she would leave the family party, and repair to the old Manor House at Horton for an indefinite period. Yes, this would be the best plan, she said to herself, as she hurried through the avenue gates. As for Teddy, she intended to speak very seriously to his father. *He* must be surety for him, if he injured her in any way, or made use of his ill-gotten information. As far as Mr. Brice was concerned, supplies should cease, for Rosamond could be fierce and bitter. She was perfectly alive to the fact that it was her money that had hitherto provided for Teddy, that had surreptitiously paid his racing debts, that had fed and clothed him. She was banker to the whole family —the golden goose—and she knew it.

The recollection of Teddy's odious threats and hateful familiarities were very present to her mind as she rang a loud peal at the hall-door bell. She entered the library, and saw the very person she wished to see, if she would strike while the iron—meaning her temper—was hot—her stepfather.

He was lounging on a sofa, reading a French novel by the light of a shaded lamp, and now and then picking his teeth with a gold tooth-pick.

"Oh, it's you, Rosamond," he said, looking up. "What a girl you are for taking a constitutional. By

the way, did you meet Teddy?"—thus leading up to the very topic she wished to introduce.

"I met him," she returned expressively, "and I hope for the last time in my life."

"What the deuce is the row now? What has he been doing?"—glancing interrogatively over his yellow book.

"Insulting me."

"Oh, nonsense, Rosamond, nonsense! You must not imagine these foolish things"—in the same tone in which one would humour a sick child.

"It's not nonsense," she replied indignantly. "Just listen, and you shall hear"—her breath coming very quick and short as she spoke. "He met me, and informed me that his coming to escort me was a great compliment, told me he admired me, and that I was like some trapeze girl; then he said he was going to marry me—he did not even *ask* me—and assured me that it was not for myself, but for my many thousand golden charms"—stopping for a moment to take breath.

"The ass! the miserable idiot!" groaned his father, in a low but intelligible voice. "Oh, the fool, the besotted fool!"

"That is not all"—she proceeded rapidly, removing her hat as she spoke—"he was amazed when I declined the honour, and informed me bluntly that if I did not change my mind, he would show me up in all the London clubs. He knows my story, and he means to use his knowledge for the basest purposes. He then endeavoured to kiss me, as a seal of his disinterested engagement, but was fortunately prevented."

"By whom?"

"Well, by me in the first instance, and by Lord

Airdrie, who saw that something was wrong, and came galloping up. I left them together."

"The devil you did!" said Colonel Brice, under his breath.

"And now I come to you, Colonel Brice," she went on in quite another tone of voice, "to relieve me wholly of this incubus—your son."

Colonel Brice became purple.

"You see, I am frank," she continued. "It is best in the present case to speak plainly. I am a desperate woman. Your son has driven me to bay, and I wish you to understand that I am *never*—I rely upon you to see to it—to meet him again. If I do, if I have to complain of him in any way, I will look to *you* for an explanation. He may, as he threatens, drive me out of society. It will not break my heart; still, I shall be very wretched if I have to forfeit the respect of all my friends. In that case I shall leave England for the Colonies, for life; and you can guess," she added significantly, "*who* will be the chief sufferers in that case. One word more. Lord Airdrie is a man whom I will *not* be brought into contact with, either; he knows all. I appeal to you to protect me from him, as well as from Mr. Brice."

Colonel Brice sat up, put his legs down on the floor, and gazed incredulously at Rosamond. Could this be Rosamond—this hard, white-faced, defiant-looking girl, who was laying down instructions, orders, and commands to *him*, Thomas Henry Davidson Brice? What had happened to her? He did not fly into one of his storms of passion—he was restrained by her eye—and by the knowledge that she held the purse-strings (and knew it), and above all by the fact that she was Lady

Airdrie—a peeress. How he loved a title! How he grovelled to a man with a handle to his name, and putting family affections aside (he had none for Teddy, and small wonder), putting interest out of the question, this girl before him was the wife of a lord. He could hardly educate his imagination to the fact, but it was a fact; and mentally prostrating himself at her feet, he promised most confidently and politely, for him, that all her wishes should be carried out to the letter.

Yes, it was all very simple to send Teddy to the right-about, but what about Airdrie? He would not go. He was (naturally) firmly resolved to lose no more time, to throw away no more valuable moments, after the last five years, but to seize the first fitting opportunity of meeting Rosamond alone, and with as much circumlocution as possible, gently lead her mind back to the past, and awaken her to the fact that he was Ronald Gordon.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

MRS. BRICE had taken to her bed. She called it neuralgia; but in reality she was suffering from the effects of a severe mental shock, and had withdrawn herself from the public eye in order to rearrange her ideas, and, figuratively, to pull herself together.

Mrs. Brice confessed to herself she had been too ready to jump to conclusions, and now she must bear the consequences. Alas! greed for money and financial distresses had tempted her to destruction, and placed her in this most awkward strait. It would have been far better to have presented Rosamond to society as a married woman with one child; but it was too late to think of all that now.

As she lay with her head buried among pillows, there was a low knock at the door, and Rosamond entered, looking stately, tall, and picturesque, in a long velvet tea-gown.

"I am sorry your head is so bad, mother," she began; "and I won't bother you more than I can help; but I have several things that I wish to say to you."

Mrs. Brice nodded, and instantly fixed a pair of apprehensive eyes upon her daughter, where she stood at the foot of the brass bed.

"I am going to Horton to-morrow morning."

"Horton?" repeated Mrs. Brice, incredulously.

"Yes; and taking Maggs with me. She doesn't object to it like Fletcher, my maid, who would probably go mad there. Maggs was born at Horton, I believe."

"But why go to Horton?"

"That is just what I have come to explain to you. I am sure you have noticed how during the last few weeks I have been quietly dropped, and shunned as if I had the plague. Good looks, good family, good fortune, count for nothing if one has no character. Now I have no character from my last place; in fact, I have none at all."

"Hush, Rosamond! How can you talk in this shocking way? Supposing some of the servants were to hear you!"

"Some one who knows has been letting in the light upon my past. Our neighbours are exceedingly curious with regard to my long stay at Horton. You remember I was there *alone* for many months after you were living in London. They don't think I was mad and in restraint, though all the Balmaines are queer; people are not cut because they have emerged from a lunatic asylum. I have felt the social atmosphere growing colder every day. I am now nearly frozen out. People look away when they see me coming. My girl friends fly. Lady Passingham, who used to kiss me when we met, now accords me the stiffest bow. I am no longer in demand for dinners and dances, and it seems to me as if the very cottagers stare at me with incredulous horror."

"But, my dear Rosamond, you are so impetuous and imaginative. Wait a little. Don't rush off to Horton just yet. Why, it's enough to drive any one to suicide, with those miles of marsh and shingle, and dreary grey sea, with an occasional body on the beach."

"My dear mother, if I had been going to put an end to myself at Horton, I would have done so years ago. Don't be in the least alarmed about me. I expect to live to a green, if not a merry, old age. I have wired to the woman at the Manor. Fletcher is packing my clothes, and I am off early to-morrow morning."

"Well, you won't be very far, and you can easily come back."

"Yes; but I shall remain away for a long time. Mr. Brice and I have had a most disagreeable interview to-day; he has threatened me with marriage—or public disgrace."

"Oh, Ted Brice is impossible!"

"And besides him there is Lord Airdrie, who in some mysterious manner has become acquainted with my affairs. I dislike him for many reasons, and I do not intend to run the chance of meeting him. And Horton will not be more lonely than a neighbourhood where no woman will speak to me."

"But it will pass—it will pass," cried Mrs. Brice, sitting up suddenly and throwing out her hands; and only that her hair was in curling-pins, she would have looked almost dramatic.

"No; how *can* it pass? I have told the truth to the Germaines. Yes, late last night I wrote the whole story to them, giving names and dates. It was only right—they are connections; they have made no difference in their kindness or manner to me, though they must have heard that unauthorized version which is going about the country. I posted the letter this morning with my own hands."

"You told them about the *baby?*"

"Yes, I told them everything. And, mother, I am

going to have all the registers searched—better late than never. It ought to have been done years ago, only you were so positive that it was an illegal marriage, and declared that it was useless. Yet if the entry is to be found I shall call myself Mrs. Gordon, and that will give the gossips a fresh subject; they really ought to be quite *grateful* to me."

"Oh, my dear Rosamond, you are getting to be just as peculiar and odd as your grandmother. Pray don't—I've a reason for asking you—do anything in a hurry. Don't be rash."

"There is nothing particularly rash in going to Horton, is there?"

Then a maid entered, bearing a letter on a salver, and handed it to Miss Balmaine.

"From Lord Airdrie, miss, and the messenger is waiting for answer."

"There is no answer," she replied after a momentary silence, still holding the note unopened in her hand.

As soon as the servant had left the room she walked over and dropped the unread letter into the middle of a hot coal fire.

"What was that, Rosamond?" asked Mrs. Brice, who was cut off by a screen from draughts and the door.

"Only a note of no consequence."

"And so you are quite determined to go to Horton to-morrow morning?"

"Yes. After all, it is only sixty miles."

"But it takes half a day to get there. You change four times—takes you as long to get there as it does to go to France! I can't think what the Balmaines ever saw in such a deadly place."

"Well, mother, I will say good-bye. If you want me,

you will know where to find me. I hope your head will be quite well by to-morrow;" and stooping over, she dropped a light kiss upon her forehead, and took her departure.

* * * * *

"Rosamond went off to Horton at cock-crow this morning," was the first thing Colonel Brice said to Lord Airdrie, when the latter entered the library. "Cart-ropes would not have held her."

"You have not enlightened her, I trust?"

"No; I understood that you wished all that sort of thing to be left to you."

"Yes; I must go to Horton immediately."

"You are in her black books. Do you think she will let you into the house?"

"Probably not; but the Marshes are wide. We shall meet there. Can you give me any idea of how I can get at the place from here?"

"No; I've never been near the confounded hole in my life. But my butler is an uncommonly clever fellow at Bradshaw. I'll ring and ask him."

That evening the chief topic of conversation in the servants' hall—the "Balmaine Arms" and the local post-office—was the news that "Lord Airdrie had followed Miss Balmaine to Horton." And why? No one could suggest anything approaching to a plausible reason.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

As the railway dawdled along to Horton, Lord Airdrie looked out, and noticed all the old familiar landmarks, and especially the white fog—a mist which invariably rose out of the Marshes ere sundown. There was a beautiful young moon overhead as he proceeded up to the town on foot, leaving his baggage for the 'bus. He knew that he must possess his soul in patience till the morrow; it was long past calling hours, and he dared not venture to stop at Horton Manor. As he walked past its high walls and six big elm trees, he noticed lights in the upper windows. *She* was there.

There had been important changes at the Merry Sailor. The rheumatics had ultimately proved too much for Mrs. Bassett, and she had sold the business to a hardy young couple, and gone to live with a niece at Wolverhampton. But the new hostess was delighted to welcome any of Mrs. Bassett's old customers, and bustled about, and had a fire in the dining-room, and another in a bedroom in no time. It was a cold night, and Ronald was glad of the warmth. He looked about him critically. Yes, there were his old friends, the sea-birds, in the case! He gave an involuntary shudder, for they recalled the gannets, and yet the gannets had been his very good friends. But for them he would not be sitting in an uncomfortable black horsehair chair in

front of a blazing fire, in the Merry Sailor. No; he would be lying alongside those other poor sailors, who had been anything but merry, and forming one more long ridge on the summit of a storm-beaten and desolate rock.

Ronald was ushered through the curious old back hall, up the easy carved staircase, into a familiar bedroom, furnished with aged furniture; the bed, a four-poster—cruelly lopped, like some great tree, in order to conform to modern notions. The Merry Sailor had been an inn for more than three hundred years.

The following morning, after an early breakfast, he went (as he had done on another memorable occasion) and stood at the door and looked out. How prim and old-fashioned the red-brick houses! There was one opposite—a venerable Queen Anne mansion—tacked on to an ancient nunnery. The next one to it had thick iron bars to every window—precisely like a fortress! How still the street was, too—yet it was not Sunday—and how clean! There was a girl actually sweeping the pathway, as if it had been a room.

It was barely ten o'clock—too soon to go and waylay Rosamond, or to call at the Manor. He decided to have a look into the old church, for the sake of its memories. The door of the venerable Norman church stood open. Lord Airdrie looked up at the great square tower, then down at the seven steps below the level of the street (or sea). These he descended, pushed back the heavy door, and entered. The atmosphere was damp and vaulty; but it was a fine, dignified edifice. He went and stood before the Balmaine pew, with its great Prayer-books, faded cushions, imposing display of hatchments, and a whole cloud of the names and feats of ancestors of distinction.

Tommy's ancestors!

He remembered how more than five years previously, he and Rosamond had occupied that very pew together. It seemed as if that sabbath day was twenty years ago. Then he walked on, and read a long inscription on a brass, respecting a charitable dole which had been left by a certain burgess, to be distributed by the lords, bailiff, and jurats, of the level of Romney Marsh. As he strolled along, wondering what a "jurat" might be, looking at the tombstones underfoot and the monuments overhead, he was aware that he was not alone. A lady was kneeling at the altar steps. She now rose, and came quickly down the chancel, and he saw that it was Rosamond—she was totally unconscious of his presence as he stood at a long distance in the nave of the old church. She passed (as he watched her) swiftly and silently down the matted middle aisle, pushed back the latch of the heavy door, and vanished. By the time that he had reached the top of the outer steps, he saw her rapidly diminishing figure at the far end of the road.

"Ay, that's Miss Balmaine herself!" volunteered a tall, elderly man, with a halt in his gait, and pick on his shoulder, indicating the sexton. "She is lady of the Manor. Ay, and one of the lords of the Marshes," he added, with a chuckle.

"She is not often here, I believe?"

"Nay, not now. In old madam's time she lived here, and I remember her a child sitting in her pew inside, when you couldn't see her head above it. She's likely gone to the school, now. She does a good bit for the town; but she'd do more if she lived here."

"Rather a dull place for a young lady."

"'Twasn't too dull for her forebears. Anyhow, she's

bound to be *buried* here. Them's the Balmaine vaults" —pointing to a sunken door and flight of steps. "I suppose you've come to have a look round at the church, sir?"

"Yes; it's a fine old building."

"Ay, that it be, and a grand thing for them that's at sea. Our spire is as good as a lighthouse! The church itself is so old that it has seen out four other parish churches—so they do tell me."

"What—here?"

"Ay, we were a great place once. If you will come around I'll show you some of the rare names and dates."

Lord Airdrie gladly accepted this offer. He might as well spend his time meditating among the tombs, as elsewhere, for there was no prospect of his meeting Rosamond before the afternoon. He knew her habits of old. After lunch she invariably sallied forth for a long excursion on the Marshes.

"What are those huge things, like fowl-crates, shaped as coffins?" he inquired, as they passed several curious constructions of wood and iron.

"Them's what we has to put in the graves as we dig, to keep back the shingle, for as fast as we dig it pours in. There's no earth to speak of, not more nor two or three foot deep; the rest is beach. I believe myself as the church was built of beach."

"I see that the people here live to a great age. You have not much to do."

"Oh, I've enough, what with the union, and babies, and bodies as is washed ashore. Why, once I had two in a week!"

"Where do you bury them?"

"Right over there—near the paupers."

"All nameless, I suppose?"

"Yes. These folks don't have no visiting-cards, and sometimes not a rag of clothes; but I can tell which is which"—hobbling forward. "Now, there, that end one was as handsome a girl as I ever laid eyes on—a lady, too. I saw her myself laid out in the mortuary, just as she came ashore. Folks made out as she had jumped off some o' the big liners, or tumbled overboard. She wore an evening gown, she did, and a gold necklace. The next one was a child of about two years old, a fine boy; his hands was tied. The long one there were a black, and next to him a foreign sailor, with big rings in his ears."

"I see you keep the place very trim and neat."

"Oh, ay, I do. I takes a pride in it, ye see; and old Madam Balmaine used to allow me something extra. She was fond of graves. She was a bit touched here"—putting a finger to his forehead. "They are all queer, one way or another."

"You mean the Balmaines?"

"Even miss, there"—pointing towards the red roof of the Manor, where it showed among its elms. "You wouldn't think it of *her*, to look at her and talk to her, but I tell you honest she is just as funny as the others."

"Why do you think so?"

"'Cause when she's home she do come here on the sly, like, and what do ye think?—puts flowers on the grave of Tom Clapp's baby, an infant as died when it were three days old, and she never laid eyes on. I've seen Mistress Clapp a-looking at them flowers an' rarely puzzled, but I never let out a word. Every one has their little fancies and feelings, and Miss Balmaine's don't do any one no harm."

"Can you tell me anything of a woman called Hogben —Mrs. Hogben? Nan was her name."

"Mother Nan, as used to take in babies and do for 'em—ah, my word, that she *did*, and give me many a job—and went round the country, collecting bottles and cat-skins."

"Yes, that is the woman. Where is she?"

"Well, sir, it ain't for me to judge her. I hope as she's not in the same place as them poor infants; but anyhow she is dead. I buried her myself about two months ago. There's no flowers on *her* grave, but one of the young limbs stuck up a bottle and a rabbit-skin, and I caught him at it, and I did give him a rare good hiding, that I did. I don't allow no liberties to be took in my churchyard."

"I suppose you are generally somewhere about?"

"Yes, sir; my house is just there, nigh the gate."

"And here we are at the gate, and I will be going on," said the visitor; and he placed as he spoke a handsome *douceur* in the sexton's ready hand.

"Thank ye kindly, sir, thank ye. If you should ever happen to have any friends buried here, I'll be pleased to look after their graves for nothing."

Lord Airdrie nodded his appreciation of this generous offer, and went off in the direction of the seashore. There he stood for a long time dreamily watching the ships and steamers and fishing-smacks that enlivened the Channel. It was a wonderfully fine bright day early in December, and he rambled about among the shingle and sea poppies for more than an hour, until it was time to return to the Merry Sailor for a lunch of bread and cheese, after which he set out for the Marshes with a beating heart.

A great expanse of short grass lay behind the Manor, and divided by hurdles and deep drains, flat as the plains of India, and scattered over with flocks of sheep. A less romantic district it would be difficult to find, yet here it was that his own romance had, so to speak, begun and ended.

Within a mile of the Manor there was a certain stone bridge, which crossed the river—a river not much superior to one of the great dikes, which were only negotiated by a couple of boards, or even one wobbly stick for the convenience of shepherds. This bridge had fallen into disuse—the road leading to it had been diverted ; and here it was that he and Rosamond had held many a rendezvous. It was, so to speak, the key to the Manor lands, and the connection between them and the far-stretching waste.

Although there was not a tree within a mile of the bridge, yet owing to the dip in the ground, one came upon it rather unexpectedly. Lord Airdrie was within a hundred yards before he was able to see it. There was some one standing on the bridge—a woman—neither villager nor shepherd's wife, but a tall young lady, wearing a brown cloth gown, a muff, and furs of Russian sable, and accompanied by a dog. She had been standing with her back to Horton, and gazing inland, when, hearing rapid footsteps (the quick, assured step of a gentleman), she turned about and descried Lord Airdrie.

As he came up to the bridge she stood awaiting him with a haughty poise of her head and a countenance every whit as arrogant as that of her great-great-grandfather, by Romney.

"I have ventured to follow you here——" he began.

"So it appears," she answered. "Do you consider it honourable, or even manly conduct? I came here to escape from you—and such as you. What has brought you?" she asked, looking at him fixedly.

"I came to see you, and to tell you three things—if I may?" returning her glance with steady eyes.

"I don't suppose that I have much choice in the matter"—with a scornful shrug.

"Can you bear to hear some great good news?"

"Bear to hear good news?" she repeated ironically. "I am such a stranger to anything of that kind, that I really cannot answer for myself; but you may try me."

"I told you that I knew that—that I knew most of your affairs."

"And *this* your good news?"

"No." Stung by her sneer, he blurted out abruptly, "Ronald Gordon is alive."

She drew a long breath, her nostrils quivered, but she remained absolutely silent.

"He loves you as much—nay, better than ever."

"Excuse me, but I really cannot believe you," she rejoined with astonishing composure. "I see you are his relative and emissary. You can go back to him and tell him what I say."

"He has never lost sight of your image in his mind; he has been faithful to you in word and deed."

"What, all these years, but never sought me!" she exclaimed, derisively. "How amazing! Pray continue. Where is he now?"

"I must confess that you receive this part of my intelligence in an unexpected manner."

"I never supposed that it was *death* that had come between us."

"What, then?"—in a sharp voice.

"Deception—desertion."

"Well, he is your husband, at any rate. He has your certificate—and you are as legally married as the queen herself."

"And he tired of me in three weeks—rather soon, was it not? My husband, you say. And yet for five years I have never heard of him. He did not consider me worth a twopenny stamp. He is not coming here, I trust?" she added, with heightened colour. "I am not a silly girl in my teens *now*."

"Wait. Have patience, and you shall hear. He went out to Melbourne—he took ship for New Zealand."

"Yes, he did," she acquiesced. "And then?"

"And then he was shipwrecked, and cast away on an island for years—a miserable barren island—bleak and bitterly cold and exposed, destitute of anything but sea birds, and far out of the track of ships."

"Yes; and after that?" she asked, and coming nearer as she spoke.

"He was rescued; a changed, aged man, he came home, after four years, and hurried to seek his wife. There was no such person, only Miss Balmaine—Mrs. Gordon did not exist."

Rosamond suddenly turned and confronted him, devouring his features with her eyes, her face as white as death.

"Rosamond," he said, in a low, tremulous voice, "don't you know me?"

"*You!*"—with a stifled shriek. "You are not Ronald!" she exclaimed, with lips that trembled so that she could hardly articulate. "Oh no, no"—throwing up her hands —"it is impossible!"

"Look at me well, and you will see that it is *not* impossible," he rejoined firmly. "Imagine those years adding lines to my face; imagine the hardships I endured—my cheeks are hollow, my skin sunburnt, my hair touched with grey, I wear a beard—and you will soon bring yourself to see that it is *not* impossible. Look here; you remember this," and from a niche in the bridge he drew out a white stone and placed it on the parapet—it had once been a signal between them; if one of them had come and gone, this stone had been the token.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

"AND *are* you Ronald?" she faltered, clutching the parapet as she spoke.

"I am," he replied deliberately.

"And, oh, it is all so strange, so sudden, I can't believe it," she said, with eyes full of tears. "How often have I come to this very bridge, weeping and broken-hearted, and in vain; and now, after so many years, and when I least expect you, when my heart is hardened against you, I find you here. What can I say to you, Ronald?"

"Say you are glad to see me, Rosamond"—deeply hurt by her coldness; "that will be enough."

"I am glad—I hope I am glad—but I haven't had time to think of it—to believe it—yet. I have been imagining such dreadful things of you, Ronald, for so long, that I cannot cast them out of my mind in one second; and"—with a sudden start—"how do you come to be Lord Airdrie?"

"My cousin Colin died, and I came in for the title. He was quite a distant relation. No one ever supposed it would ever fall to a poor beggar like Ronald Gordon, but it did; and you are Lady Airdrie."

"Then, Ronald, I don't understand it at all. How is it that you have been at home for months, have met me daily, at times, have never owned me, never discovered

yourself? What does it mean? I saw the likeness. *I* was impelled to speak, but *you* have been silent."

"I have told you two things, Rosamond—that I am your husband, and that you are Lady Airdrie. To explain the third will take some time. I must also explain my apparently extraordinary conduct; but you will forgive it when you know more, Rosamond"—looking at her reproachfully. "I wish—I know you cannot help your heart—affection is spontaneous—I wish you were a little more glad to see me."

"It has been such—such a shock," she returned. "I cannot realize it yet. I cannot think of you as the old Ronald Gordon; I can't separate you from Lord Airdrie. How can I bring myself to believe that I am Lord Airdrie's wife? But, Ronald"—blushing—"you know that I have never loved any one but you, and it will all come back."

"Come back!" he echoed angrily. "I don't believe in a love that is allowed to cool, and freeze, and die, ever coming to life again. Oh, Rosie, if you only knew the awful time, the long leaden years, I spent on that island, and how the thought of you kept me alive—the frantic determination to *live* to see you once more! Only for that, I would have been like other poor fellows, who lost heart—worn out by hope deferred, by gnawing hunger, by black despair, who just laid themselves down and died. Sometimes I envied them, as I looked on the long mounds, their graves—graves that grew thicker as months rolled on. But I resolutely turned my eyes away from death, and clung to life, and to days of misery, and fixed my gaze steadily on the horizon, ever looking for the sail that was to come, Heaven sent, and take me back to *you*, Rosamond!

And all these bitter years you believed that I had betrayed you—Rosamond, how could you think it?—deserted you into the bargain! I, who only lived in the hope of seeing you again, found that my place knew me no more. I was worse than a dead man out of mind; for you hated my memory, repudiated my name, and every feeling you once had for me was withered and extinct. And people talk of woman's constancy!" Here his voice broke a little, and he turned abruptly away.

This appeal touched a chord in his listener's breast—a chord mute for years. With an impulse that carried her out of herself, she suddenly threw her arms round his neck and sobbed, "Ronald, Ronald, I know it is you! Thank God for giving you back to me!"

For some time she wept so unrestrainedly that she could not speak; but she clung to him in a manner far more eloquent than mere words, and he was satisfied; and many were the kisses that he showered upon her hair, her face, her hands. Meanwhile a youth, wending his way homewards, stood and gazed, open-mouthed, and subsequently told his family circle, with deep delight, that he had "seen a young man on the bridge near the upper dike, a-kissing Miss Balmaine, and she a-hugging him too." His tale was received with derision, for every one knew that Miss Balmaine did not care for beaux, and that there was no pleasing her; she was a very distant, "stand-offish" lady. It was somebody else, for sure.

But Bob Druce held valiantly to his own opinion. "If it were not her, it was as like her as two peas. And what other lady ever came that way, he would be glad to know? Any way, her dog was there. He was sitting on the bridge as large as life."

This last argument was a clincher, and the incredulous audience began to prick up their ears, and wonder, and recall vague, half-forgotten stories, of how Miss Balmaine, when a young slip of a girl, used to meet a gentleman on the Marshes years ago, unbeknown to her grandmother—or to any one. Yes, she had been seen. They now cast their minds back, and recollected it well. There had been whispers, strange rumours, and maybe this was the man come back, after all.

There was a good deal of talk and speculation round the Druce's supper-table that night, but none of their surmises came near the truth.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

"YOU have not told me yet why you never claimed me —why you left me in ignorance for so long?" said Rosamond at last.

"No, not yet," he answered, in a husky voice.

"But you will?" she asked insistently; "and now."

"Yes, I will, but I don't know how to say it. I was under the impression, until two days ago, that you had done something—something that had embittered me against you."

"And what was that?"—with an air of injured innocence.

"I will tell you by-and-by. I am coming to it. When I searched for you at Horton, I discovered, as it seemed to me, this evil deed of yours, and I was more shocked and astonished than I can express. I hardened my heart against you. I resolved to drive you out of my thoughts, and not to claim you as my wife till time had softened my anger. Still, I could not resist a wish to see you, and to be near you, and so I took Queen's Gift in order to be in your neighbourhood; but you came upon me unexpectedly that evening when you descended from the steps of the Pagoda—do you remember?"

"Yes, I recollect now; you looked quite odd, and ill, and no wonder."

"I had meant to have schooled myself into meeting you. You took me unawares, and——"

But suddenly interrupting him, with her face on fire—

"But tell me, Ronald, who is Tommy?"

"You had a baby, Rosamond?"

"Yes, and oh, Ronald, I never saw it. But I will take you and show you its little grave under the shadow of the church. If it had lived"—burying her face in her hands.

"If it had lived—what then?"—anxiously.

"I should be too—too happy if it had lived. I should have nothing else to wish for."

"What"—eying her nervously—"would you say if he was alive?"

"Ronald, you are cruel to ask such a question! You know very well that I should go mad with joy!"

"No, no, you would not. Great joy never does any one harm."

"No"—trembling all over—"no. I have known great joy to-day. What—what more have you to tell me?"

"I—I will tell you a kind of story, and then, my dear Rosamond, you will understand. I came to Horton, but you were gone. You were a queen in the fashionable world—you were known as Miss Balmaine, consequently our marriage was a secret. You were a rich heiress, and had deserted Horton for London, Paris, and Rome. I happened to meet a small ragged urchin in a lane, as I took a stroll before dinner—a pretty, plucky little fellow. He had a battle with a dog, and I came to the rescue, and we took a fancy to one another, and I carried him back to dinner."

"And this is Tommy. Yes, I understand now."

"Wait, and you will hear. Poor little chap, he was glad of a good meal! He was ragged and hungry, and

had marks of blows and red weals on his tender neck and arms."

"Poor darling!" ejaculated Rosamond, sympathetically.

"He belonged to a woman called 'Mother Nan'—a drunken, fierce-eyed, violent virago, who let him spend his time in the streets with other gutter children."

"Oh, who would believe that, to look at him now?" exclaimed Rosamond, in amazement. "He looks like a gentleman's son—every inch; and oh, I cannot make it out"—gazing at him questioningly—"he always seemed to me to be so like *you*, Ronald—your image, and yet you picked him out of the gutter at Horton. I'm certain his parents were gentle folk; he is no common child."

"No"—sorely exercised in his mind as to how he was to tell her. Something in his look revealed his anxiety, and she exclaimed with scarlet cheeks—

"I know you are going to tell me something—about Tommy—I know you are."

"I wish I knew how to say what I must tell you. I wish to Heaven, Rosamond, that I could tell my tale without incriminating anyone. I wish"—looking steadily into her eyes, and speaking very deliberately—"*that I could spare your mother.*"

"My mother! Why, what has she to say to it?" she demanded in amazement.

"I'm afraid she has been much to blame. She has poisoned your mind against me."

"She believed you were somebody who had come here and deceived me, and married me under a false name."

"Yes, my dear, and, thanks to her, *you* have been

sailing under false colours for years. She made you believe that you were not married—she tried me, and found me guilty, and did not give me a ghost of a chance; but she knows the truth now."

"Knows the truth—for how long?"

"Since the other evening at the Court, when you declined to come down to meet me. Do you recollect?"

"Yes, and begin to understand some things I could not make out before. Everything comes back to me now. Amy, how curiously she looked at me! How odd she seemed! She laughed so much when I asked her about Lady Airdrie. I am not surprised *now* that she was quite hysterical."

"But to talk a little more about your mother, Rosie. She put the blackest construction upon the whole affair, hustled you off secretly to Horton, and said, when your child was dead, that it was a good riddance. Did it"—lowering his voice—"ever strike you that she had done anything with it?"

"Oh, my God, Ronald"—clasping her hands together in a frenzy of horror—"you are not going to tell me that my mother murdered it?"

"No, indeed I am not. You can understand that she considered it a living disgrace; that she wished it out of the way—anywhere. Can you"—taking both her hands firmly in his—"can you believe that she deceived you, and that it did not die?"

"Not die!" she screamed. "And where is it, Ronald? Ronald, how can you torture me like this? Is it—is"—seizing him fiercely by the arm—"is it—the child—you spoke of as my baby—Tommy?"

She read the answer in his eyes. It was enough. It

was too much joy. She sank slowly backwards in a dead faint—that is, she would have fallen had not he caught her, and carried her to the bank of the stream, bathed her face, and opened the collar of her dress. After a surprisingly short time his remedies proved successful. She opened her eyes and sat up, pushed back her wet hair, and after looking at Ronald in grave silence for some time, said in a faint voice—

"It is not all a dream, is it, about your being Ronald —and Tommy——?"

"Not a bit of it, my darling Rosie. Now you know the three things I had to tell you, you are a good deal wiser and happier than you were this morning."

"How soon can I see him—Tommy—my—son—too! How strange—how delightful it sounds! But how can he understand that I am his mother? He will not believe it; he calls me Miss Balmaine."

"I think I can trust you to make him believe the truth. He has always been devoted to you, as it is, Rosamond, and you to him. You are always 'the pretty lady.'"

"And what did my mother do with him? All you have told me makes my head quite giddy."

"She gave him to Maggs, who passed him off as her niece's child, farmed him out to Mother Nan at a few shillings a week, and finally Maggs forgot him."

"Mother Nan, that beat him, and starved him? Oh, Ronald," she exclaimed piteously, "my mother could never have known of this!"

"Probably not. She relied on Maggs to get rid of him quietly, and ask no particulars. Maggs made him over to a coastguard's wife, who went to America, and passed him on, like a bad shilling, till he came into my hands."

"You have not explained that part quite clearly. Did you take him out of charity, or what?"

"No, not quite. I knew who he was, and if you will listen patiently, you shall hear all."

"Of course I will listen. Go on at once," she urged eagerly.

"But when I came to Horton, there was no trace of you to be found, and I felt awfully disheartened and cast down, I need hardly remark. I went out for a stroll before dinner, and Providence threw the child in my way. He diverted my thoughts, he took my fancy. I brought him to the inn, and gave him a good dinner; and afterwards, when I was smoking outside, the landlady, Mrs. Bassett—who thought it a strange proceeding on the part of a young man like me, bringing in a beggar's brat—told me his history, with many nods and winks and whispers."

"His history?"

"Yes; she had it at her fingers' ends. The boy I had taken a fancy to had good blood in his veins. She told me about his mother, Miss Balmaine; how she had come to Horton secretly; how Maggs had passed off the child as the infant of a relative of her own; how Miss Balmaine had turned her back upon the place, and had never been seen again; and how Tommy was beaten and ill-used, especially since the few shillings for his keep had not been paid;—in short, how his mother had deserted and forgotten him."

"Yes!" gasped Rosamond. "Go on."

"Well, of course, I believed her story. I had the evidence of my own senses. Moreover, I could see that the boy resembled my family, and that he was a regular chip of the old Gordon block. It needed no more. I

took him away without delay. I bought him from Mother Nan for twenty pounds. He was not dear—not a bad bargain. You don't think I paid too much, do you?"—smiling. "And you can imagine, Rosamond, that I was not very well pleased with *you?*"

"How could you believe me capable of such unnatural conduct, Ronald?" she asked indignantly.

"Oh, come now, that is rather too much of a good joke—a regular case of the pot calling the kettle black. Pray, what did you believe of *me?* If I thought you an inhuman, unnatural mother, you thought me an out-and-out scoundrel—and which was the worst? And, besides, your manner when I met you—your cool, cynical indifference to everybody, your callousness, your worldliness—quite filled in the picture of Miss Balmaine that worthy Mrs. Bassett had sketched with such a rude black outline. But I often wondered you never found me out, Rosie. Am I—nay, I must be—changed past all recognition?"

"A beard makes an immense difference in any man. And then you are so much darker and thinner; but I dare say I shall get accustomed to you"—smiling through her tears.

"Well, we will hope so, at any rate. And now I will leave you at your own gate for the last time, and we may as well be starting. To-morrow I shall come and take you away from Horton Manor for ever."

"Not for ever, Ronald. We will come back, even for a day or two, now and then, when we want a little quiet."

"A little quiet! It never struck me that Miss Balmaine was partial to a little quiet."

"But I am—and I am not Miss Balmaine now, you see."

"I would have thought you hated Horton, and that you had too many painful reminiscences connected with it?"

"Yes, many, many bitter days and hours I have spent here"—waving her hand towards the Marshes, the elm trees, and the old church steeple. "But I need not think of them now. We met here, Ronald—you forget that. Tommy was born here. You have both been given back to me here. I have *some* pleasant recollections connected with the place, and Roy likes it too"—patting his head.

"I am sure of it, and I am equally sure that I used to be madly jealous of Roy. It seemed very strange to me that you had kept *him*, and yet parted with Tommy."

"Yes, it would have been strange if it had been true; and oh, Ronald! the little grave I have cried over so often, that I have stolen out to visit after dusk! How wicked of Maggs!"—stopping and stamping her foot. "She ought to be prosecuted for such dreadful falsehoods. The lock of fair hair that I always wore—and Tommy's hair is brown! She ought to be transported for life."

"I suppose you gave her no peace till you saw the grave, and she was wearied by reason of your importunity. I'll tell you what her punishment shall be."

"What?"—very eagerly. "Could she be tried for child-stealing? She stole my child!"

"No, no, no. You shall call her, whenever you get home, and introduce her to me; and she will be well punished when she reflects that she has made away with my heir—for Mother Nan is dead, and the secret of Tommy's disappearance died with her: that twenty pounds killed her; she drank it all:—and for the future we will dispense with Mrs. Maggs's services."

"I wonder what the county will say, Ronald, when

they find you have a wife of five years' standing? And how are they to be told that I am she?"

"I'm sure I don't know. The truth is best for our own friends—a runaway match, a shipwreck, and a misunderstanding. The gossips will have a rare find, talking it over. It won't last for more than nine days; that's one comfort."

"Some of the young ladies won't be pleased, Ronald."

"I can't help that. You must admit frankly, Rosie, that I never paid one of them the smallest attention."

"What? Oh, fie! Not Amy Jebb?"

"That was only to talk about you—nothing more."

"Amy did not think so"—emphatically.

"Then Amy must have been a little fool."

"She made me her confidante—how odd it seems now!—and asked me fifty times if I thought you meant anything. I was sick of the subject."

"And what did you say, oh far-seeing, penetrating lady?"

"Oh, I told her that I hoped so, for her sake."

"That was very nice of you, Rosie."

"Nonsense, Ronald! Did I dream, do you suppose, in my wildest moments, that this girl was consulting me with regard to the attentions of my own husband? No—not quite"—contemptuously.

"You could not be jealous, of course?"

"Could I not? You had better not try me!"

"And pray, Lady Airdrie——"

"No, no, don't call me that," she interrupted quickly.

"Yes, I shall; I like to hear how it sounds. Pray how do you think I felt at balls, as I stood in doorways looking on, and watched dozens of fellows surrounding the lovely Miss Balmaine—my wife? How do you

think I felt when I heard announced at a mess-table that you were going to be married?"

Rosamond's indignant protestations were cut short by her own hall door, which was wide open, and standing, as it were, framed in it, was Maggs, as cross as two sticks, and looking both fierce and authoritative.

"*This* is no time of the evening for you to be out, Miss Rosamond, and roving about the Marshes. You know the fright you got there once. Oh, I'm sure I beg your lordship's pardon. I did not see you. Are you coming in?"—rather sullenly.

"Only for a moment"—glancing at Rosamond, who had seated herself in a fatigued attitude on one of the hall chairs, removed her hat, laid down her muff, and fixed a pair of judicial eyes on Maggs.

"I will just come in for an instant, to tell you something. You don't remember me as well as I remember you, Mrs. Maggs; and yet you have seen me in this house before."

"Never, sir, to my knowledge"—impressively.

"Yes; I came to see old Mrs. Balmaine once. I was then Mr. Gordon."

"What! the engineer fellow? Lauk a mussy me!"—startled out of her good manners by such a piece of news.

"The 'engineer fellow,' as you say, and subsequently"—looking at her very hard—"Miss Balmaine's husband."

"And what are you now?" she shrilly demanded.

"Why, still her husband, of course."

"But you are Lord Airdrie!" cried Maggs, combatively.

"Yes, you are quite right; and she who was once Mrs. Gordon is now Lady Airdrie. You thought very strange things of me, Mrs. Maggs. I was shipwrecked, and cast

away for years, but I married Miss Balmaine before I went to Australia, as she, no doubt, informed you, and now I wish to know what you have done with our son?"

"Oh, great merciful patience alive!"—staggering back against the clock. "Why did I not know this in time? What am I to do? what am I to do? what is Mrs. Brice to do?"—wringing her hands. "We meant it for the best. We sent him out to nurse, and the woman declared a strange gentleman adopted him, and she's dead now, and what am I to do?"

"It's all right, Maggs," said Lord Airdrie, after a long pause, "and no thanks to you. Get Lady Airdrie's things packed; she is going from this to-morrow. After to-morrow we shall no longer require your services; but as you have been a long time in the family, you shall receive a comfortable pension—be provided for for life—which is more than you deserve—you deserve something else."

"I'm sure, your lordship"—bursting into tears—"it *is* more than I deserve; for I must admit I am a wicked old woman—a wicked old woman."

"I quite agree with you," he rejoined, as he walked out of the house, accompanied by Rosamond.

Mrs. Maggs dried her eyes, and watched the couple sauntering slowly to the gate, and linger there for a few minutes. Then Lord Airdrie stooped and kissed his companion, opened the wicket, and went out, whilst Maggs still stood half stupefied in the hall. So she *had* been married, after all, to the engineer; and he turned out to be a lord, and Miss Balmaine's husband. It was the queerest thing she ever knew—and how stern he had looked when he asked for the child! Well, on the whole, they had let her off easy—she was getting old;

she would settle in the village—and she was not half as much to blame as Mrs. Brice.

The extraordinary intelligence which came filtering to the ears of the Sandshire folk was at first laughed to scorn. To hear that "Lord and Lady Airdrie had gone off to the North together, a married couple of five years' standing" (a couple who had left their respective homes a few days previously—one in the character of a spinster under a cloud, and the other as an eligible but inconsolable widower), was putting too great a strain upon their credulity! But in a short time Rosamond's letter to Lady Germaine became public property, and had a circulation among a certain set which almost threw the *Arminster Herald* into the shade.

After due reflection, the county pronounced a decree. They were rather pleased than otherwise with this strange romance which had happened in their midst; it furnished a theme for letters and conversation for a much longer period than the proverbial nine days. They declared that "truth was stranger than fiction," but that there were circumstances connected with the part Mrs. Brice had played in the affair, which they would be glad to have elucidated; and although their friendly desire was never satisfactorily accomplished, Colonel, Mr., and Mrs. Brice have once more repaired to the Continent, and have wisely determined to reside abroad.

But when they come South, the Airdries keep open house at Balmaine Court.

THE END.

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K22